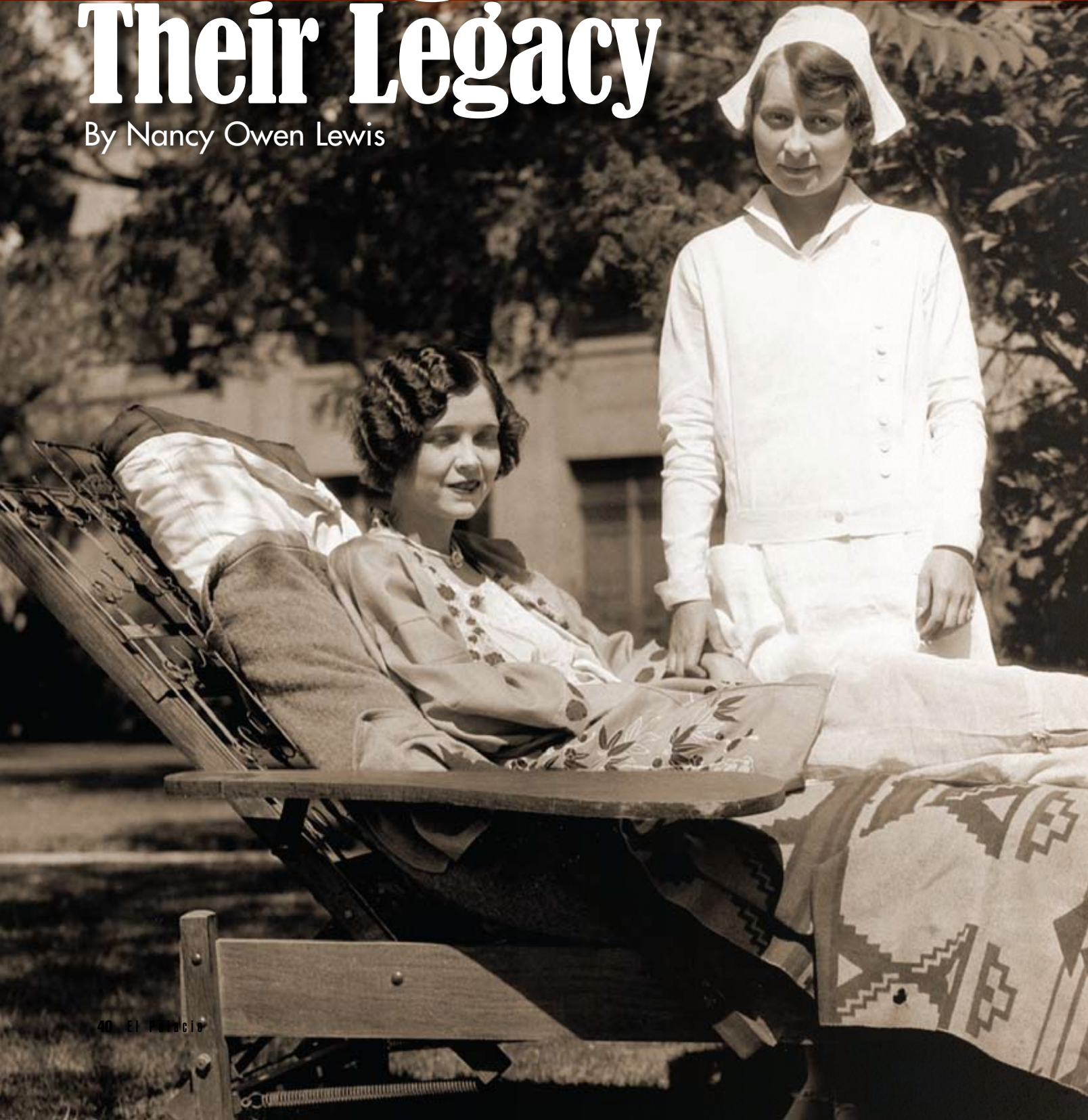


Chasing the Cure in New Mexico

# The Lungers and Their Legacy

By Nancy Owen Lewis





**“A Place Like No Other,”** a series inspired by the creation of the New Mexico History Museum, is devoted to exploring New Mexico history through new research and recent insights of curators, artists, collections managers, educators, historians, archaeologists, anthropologists, and ethnohistorians—work that will inspire lines of inquiry and exhibitions for years to come.

In this article, cultural anthropologist Nancy Owen Lewis recalls the promise that high-and-dry New Mexico made to people suffering from lung diseases who sought a better life for a little longer.

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**T**uberculosis, once the leading cause of death in America, brought thousands of health seekers to New Mexico. From 1880 to 1940 they flocked to its mountains and deserts, hoping to heal. Those with sufficient resources checked into one of sixty sanatoriums, while others “chased the cure on their feet.” These “lungers,” as they were called, included some of the “Who’s Who of New Mexico”: Will Shuster and Carlos Vierra, who “came to heal and stayed to paint”; William R. Lovelace and Edgar T. Lassetter, who upon recovery founded the Lovelace Clinic; Dorothy McKibben, who wrote about J. Robert Oppenheimer and served as gatekeeper for the Manhattan Project; and Clinton P. Anderson, who became a powerful United States senator.

**LEFT:** “On the Grounds of a Sanatorium,” Hicks, ca. 1925, promotional material showcasing New Mexico’s salubrious climate and personal care. The Albuquerque Museum Photoarchives, PA 82.181.435.

**ABOVE:** *Santa Fe Trail Magazine*, New Mexico Cottage Sanatorium, located three miles from Silver City, ca 1912. Neg. No. 05109, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).



New Mexico Cottage Sanatorium, located in the "Golden Climate" of Silver City, New Mexico, unattributed, n.d.  
Neg. No. 051095, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

By 1920 health seekers comprised an estimated 10 percent of New Mexico's population. Although the tubercle bacillus had been isolated in 1882, the development of streptomycin and other effective drugs did not occur until the 1940s. During the intervening decades, the medically approved regimen consisted of nutritious food, fresh air, and rest—preferably in a high, dry, and sunny place. With its high elevation, abundant sunshine, and arid climate, New Mexico was considered ideal.

That fact was not lost on the New Mexico Bureau of Immigration. Once established in 1880, the bureau wasted no time in advertising the territory's healing climate, partly to promote New Mexico in its long struggle for statehood. *New Mexico: The Tourists Shrine*, published in 1882, asserted that "the lowest death rate from tubercular disease in America is in New Mexico." Local communities soon began promoting their own healing properties. Santa Fe called itself the "Land of Sunshine." Albuquerque's slogan became "Heart of the Well Country," while Silver City, plugged as the city "with the Golden Climate," claimed it had the most salubrious climate of all.

Health seekers began to arrive in 1880, when New Mexico became more easily accessible with the coming of the railroad, but facilities were limited until the turn of the century. A pamphlet issued in 1887 by the Silver City Bureau of Immigration stated that "in the hotels well-furnished, bright sunny rooms and good board can be had at very reasonable rates, while private board may be obtained in many families." The pamphlet suggested that an invalid of limited means could "pitch his tent or build his cabin where he pleases without fearing a land owner's interference." Ranches were also recommended for the ailing: "He

will be outdoors in the life-giving sunshine all day long, and that is what his condition demands," wrote Charles Almy in an article appearing in the June 8, 1900, edition of the *Silver City Enterprise*. Nevertheless, he warned that it might be "a difficult matter to get on a ranch unless one has friends who own one and are willing to put up with an invalid."

Some health seekers expressed dismay at what they found when they came to New Mexico. After being diagnosed with tuberculosis, Hugh A. Cooper, a Presbyterian minister from Iowa, arrived in Albuquerque in 1903 and was shocked by the lack of facilities. "We had nothing here but the climate," he reported in an account published by the Presbyterian Hospital Center in 1967. "Until coming to this territory, I never realized the desolation of the consumptive. I could take the reader to tents or cheap rooming houses not far from my home where cultured people are living on a poor and scanty diet." Cooper recovered and went on to establish Southwestern Presbyterian Sanatorium in Albuquerque.

Although sanatoriums were already in use in Germany during the nineteenth century, they didn't become popular in the United States until physician Edward L. Trudeau cured himself of tuberculosis during a retreat in the Adirondack Mountains. In 1885 he established the Adirondack Cottage Sanatorium, which became a model for the rest of the country. New Mexico's old military forts were soon eyed as possible sanatorium sites. The impetus to convert them, however, was provided by the Spanish American War, for by 1898 the U.S. Soldiers Home, in Washington, D.C., had been inundated with consumptive veterans. It quickly became apparent that facilities in a more salubrious climate were

needed. In 1899 authorities established the U.S. Marine Hospital Sanatorium at Fort Stanton, in Lincoln County, and the U.S. Army General Hospital for tubercular soldiers at Fort Bayard, in Grant County.

In his 1908 *Report to the Secretary of the Interior*, territorial governor George Curry applauded the forts-turned-sanatoriums for their “splendid successes in the treatment of tuberculosis, which furnish constant and convincing proof of the right of New Mexico to the title of ‘the nation’s sanatorium.’” New Mexico, in fact, continued to welcome health seekers long after other states tried to restrict their immigration. Tax breaks were offered for sanatorium construction, and in 1908 New Mexico ranked fifth in the nation in the number of beds for tubercular patients.

When New Mexico finally achieved statehood in 1912, thirty sanatoriums had been built, and another thirty would be established in the decades that followed. Churches played a key role in the operation of these facilities, which included St. Vincent Sanatorium in Santa Fe, St. Joseph’s Sanatorium in Silver City and Albuquerque, Holy Cross Sanatorium in Deming, and the Methodist Deaconess Sanatorium in Albuquerque.

Private sanatoriums also flourished—many of them founded by health-seeking physicians who came west to chase the cure and stayed to heal the sick. In 1904 William T. Brown purchased land outside Watrous and built Valmora Industrial Sanatorium to provide care for stricken workers from the Chicago area. Carl Gellenthien, a former patient, succeeded him as medical director. In 1905 Earl Bullock founded Cottage San in Silver City, and the following year Frank Mera purchased Sunmount Tent City in Santa Fe and turned it into an upscale tuberculosis sanatorium. Billed as “The Sanatorium Different,” Sunmount attracted artists, writers, and other luminaries such as poet Alice Corbin Henderson and John Gaw Meem. Meem recovered to become one of New Mexico’s leading architects. Henderson, who lived to age sixty-eight, continued to write and became curator at the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, which was designed by her husband, William Penhallow Henderson, in 1937.

Treatment was based on four cardinal principles: rest, fresh air, ample good food, and a positive attitude. “Too much emphasis cannot be made on the absolute necessity of enforced quiet and rest in the treatment of tuberculosis,” stated L. G. Rice, president of the state Board of Health. “A comfortable chair, preferably of the Adirondack type, located where there is lots of fresh air, without exposure to drafts and storms and with a pleasant outlook, is a very great help.” His recommendations appeared in the May 1914 issue of the *Killgloom Gazette*, an Albuquerque newsletter that offered advice to health seekers.



New Mexico Cottage Sanatorium, interior, Silver City, New Mexico, unattributed, n.d. Neg. No. 051094, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).



St. Vincent's Hospital room, Jesse L. Nusbaum, 1910. Neg. No. 061377, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

To take full advantage of the climate, consumptives were encouraged to get as much fresh air as possible. Patients at Fort Stanton, for example, were required to “stay outdoors at least eight hours daily and always when indoors keep the windows open.” At Sunmount Sanatorium, invalids slept in special cottages equipped with small, screened sleeping porches, while at Valmora, patients used mirrors to direct the sun’s rays down their throats, a practice known as heliotherapy. Smoking and chewing tobacco in moderation were permitted, but strict rules were imposed on spitting: “only in your spit cup or into the large spittoons provided for that purpose.”

Because tuberculosis literally consumed its victims, sanatoriums plied their patients with food. “I have known patients who



Croquet at Sunmount. Outdoor activities were key to treating TB patients, who were encouraged to soak up the sun and breathe New Mexico's dry air. New Mexico State Records Center & Archives, John Gaw Meem Photo Collection 0147, #23505.

were drinking 26 glasses of milk and swallowing a dozen raw eggs per day, and in addition were making a brave attempt to eat three meals that would do credit to a harvest hand,” wrote physician LeRoy Peters in an article appearing in the August 1914 issue of the *Killgloom Gazette*. Gaining weight was considered such an important indicator of progress that in his 1901 *Report to the Secretary of the Interior*, Governor Miguel Otero included a list of 100 patients at Fort Stanton that stated how much weight each had gained during the last week in December.

If a patient failed to make progress, the physician might prescribe postural drainage—draining fluid from the lungs by hanging the afflicted person upside-down—or artificial pneumothorax, the intentional collapse of a diseased lung in order to allow it to rest and heal. This procedure involved inserting an inert gas into the pleural cavity, which initially proved difficult. “For two years we worked without advantage of . . . X-ray equipment,” recalled Peters in an article appearing in the February 1940 issue of *Southwestern Medicine*. “Lungs were over-compressed [and] diaphragms pushed downward with displacement of liver and other abdominal viscera, and many times the unhappy patient made worse than better.”

Regardless of the therapies used, treatment was a slow process, and consumptives who checked into a New Mexico sanatorium could anticipate an average stay of nine months. Upon admission, patients faced the dual challenge of adjusting to life in a highly regimented environment and cultivating “a cheerful and hopeful spirit.” As Rice explained, one’s attitude has “a great influence over the processes of the body.”

To help patients maintain an upbeat attitude, many sanatoriums offered occupational therapy and diversions such as billiards

and croquet. Sunmount, for example, hosted mariachi concerts, horseback rides, and excursions to nearby pueblos. Patients attended lectures by archaeologist Sylvanus Morley and poetry readings by Carl Sandburg. Percy Pogson offers a glimpse of the activities at Cottage San in an album he made while a patient there from 1914 to 1915 that includes pictures of “golfing lungers,” horseback riding trips, and picnics. Pogson recovered and moved to El Paso, where he died at the age of eighty.

Other health seekers were not so fortunate. Helen Norine was a teenager when she was admitted to St. Joseph’s Sanatorium in 1913. Her life is vividly portrayed in a series of letters, now at the Silver City Museum, which she sent to her family in Minnesota. On November 23 she wrote: “Dear Mother: I got blood tonic this morning and it hurts like h—I. Say I don’t want anyone to come down for Xmas cause I won’t be well enough to be out of bed and it will be so cold and everything. I’d rather have someone come later on when I’m up and can go for a ride around the country or go to some neighboring town for fun.” Helen, at age eighteen, died three months later of pulmonary tuberculosis.

Norine’s case was not exceptional. One study estimated that from the beginning of the sanatorium movement through the 1940s, nearly 25 percent of patients died in the hospital, while 50 percent of those released succumbed within five years of discharge. Despite these grim statistics, health seekers continued to pour into New Mexico.

Not everyone welcomed them. Mela Koeber recalled that when she was a little girl, “Everybody was scared to death of the people who came out here with tuberculosis. I was warned absolutely not to play with children who came from TB families,” she said in an account published in *Shining River Precious Land: An Oral*

## Cultivating Cheer

A number of sanatoriums had newsletters, such as the as the *Killgloom Gazette*, which was initiated in January 1914 by patients at the Methodist Deaconess Sanatorium. The *Killgloom Gazette* soon evolved from a mimeographed sheet to a printed publication, and in September 1914 it became the *Herald of the Well Country*. The newsletters offered advice to the health seeker and also provided information about activities as well as arrivals and departures in the various “sans.”

To help the health seeker “cultivate a cheerful and hopeful spirit,” they also were full of jokes and poems, such as the following from the July 1914 issue of the *Killgloom Gazette*:

Little Bo Peep,  
 Could not sleep,  
 But coughed the whole night thru  
 She scattered the bugs  
 All over the rugs

Now her sheep have T.B. too.

Other jokes and poems from *The Killgloom Gazette*, include:

She (weepfully): Last summer you swore to love me until  
 death should part us.

He: I know, but you must remember that four doctors had  
 just said you couldn't live three months.

And:

The Tale of the TB who Wouldn't Chase,

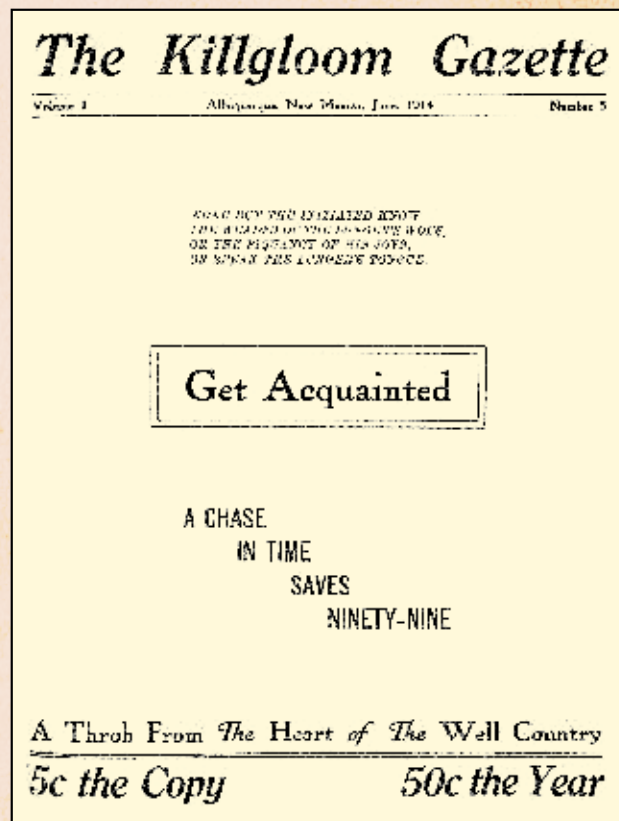
Chapter I: Coughin

Chapter II: Scoffin

Chapter III: Coughin Often

Chapter IV: Off in Coffin

The *Gazette* also published more serious articles. Its August 1914 edition, for example, offered the following advice:



The other day our attention was called to the attitude of a healthseeker [who] . . . made the remark that he didn't like to think of himself as a lunger. In a way we can't blame any one for feeling . . . like that, [but] the attitude is certainly a detriment to a speedy and thorough cure . . . The TB is not like other folks and never will be unless he thinks of himself as a TB and acts like one, which means to watch his temp, his diet and to conserve every energy—which is to chase. —NOL

Excerpts from the *Killgloom Gazette*, Vol. 1, Nos. 4, 5 (cover reproduced) and 7 (1914). Albuquerque and New Mexico Pamphlet Collection, MSS 122 BC, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

## A PLACE LIKE **NO OTHER**

*History of Albuquerque's North Valley* (Albuquerque Museum, 1986). Many hotels would not accept tuberculars, and want ads for apartments frequently said "No Sick." A health seeker able to pay the \$50 to \$100 monthly fee to stay at a sanatorium was one thing, but thousands scarcely had enough to pay for their train ticket.

"They are sent to us or drift here in all stages of the disease, and only too often without income or friends," wrote C. M. Mayes in the November 1909 issue of the *Journal of the New Mexico Medical Society*. "They sit about our parks, on our curbs, in our places of amusement and recreation—a menace to the exposed and a burden both to themselves and our citizenship."

To address the problem, cities changed their advertising strategies. In 1914 the Commercial Club issued a pamphlet titled, "Why Albuquerque, New Mexico Will Make You Well." The back cover, however, warned:

DONT come to Albuquerque for health:

1. If you are broke—
2. As a last resort
3. Expecting to get well in a week
4. Albuquerque does not invite indigent or hopeless cases.



In promoting New Mexico as a health resort, officials continued to stress not only its salubrious climate but also the health of local residents. "That the native people of this section experience such wonderful immunity from tuberculosis, especially of the respiratory tracts, must have its explanation in the very favorable climatic conditions surrounding." This statement, issued in 1906 by

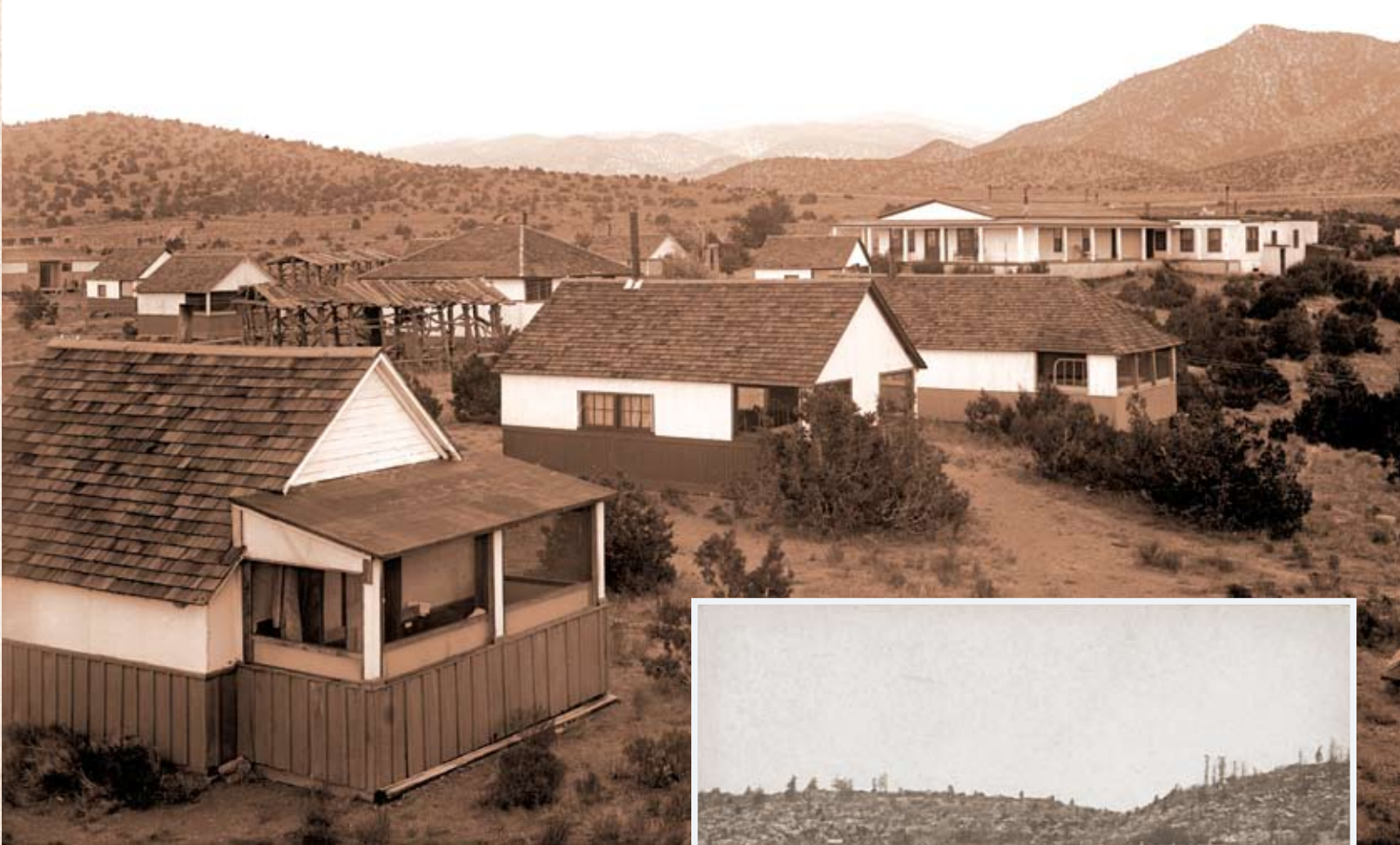
the Bureau of Immigration, was followed by similar reports.

In 1918, however, several events occurred that would dramatically alter this perception. That summer, several hundred New Mexico soldiers were discharged from the military because of tuberculosis. Hoping to find treatment for them, Governor Washington E. Lindsey contacted numerous sanatoriums, only to find that beds were occupied by out-of-state health seekers. Governor Lindsey also sought help from the adjutant general in Washington, but to no avail.



**ABOVE:** Promotional material for Albuquerque, which purported to be "in the Heart of Well Country." Albuquerque and New Mexico Pamphlet Collection, Center for Southwest Research, Albuquerque, New Mexico.

**BELOW:** TB Sanatorium, Socorro, New Mexico, 1939. Neg. No. 052183, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).



He then contacted the U.S. surgeon general, who sent J. W. Kerr, a physician from the U.S. Public Health Service, to conduct a statewide health survey. Kerr was shocked to discover that “the death rate from tuberculosis among the Indians in New Mexico is over twice that of the average in the Registration Area and that disease is estimated to cause over 800 deaths (not migratory health seekers) annually in our State.”

At Kerr’s urging, New Mexico established the Department of Health in 1919, which immediately began tackling the state’s many health problems, including tuberculosis. In 1936 the state established its own sanatorium, which provided free treatment to indigent New Mexicans. By this time, however, the sanatorium movement had begun to wane. During the Depression, the flood of out-of-state health seekers dwindled sharply, since fewer people could afford the luxury of extended care in a private sanatorium. Many came to realize that it was the sanatorium regimen—with its emphasis on rest, diet, and fresh air—and not its location that was critical.

The end of the health-seeker movement came in 1944 with the discovery of streptomycin, and eventually other drugs, which proved effective in treating tuberculosis. Sanatoriums had become medical anachronisms. One by one they closed, many converting to other uses. Sunmount became a Carmelite

**ABOVE:** Cottages at Sunmount – “The Sanatorium Different” – Santa Fe, New Mexico, 1913. Jesse L. Nusbaum, Neg. No. 061391, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

**INSET:** Valmora Ranch Sanatorium, Watrous, New Mexico, unattributed. Neg. No. 178018, Palace of the Governors (MNM/DCA).

Monastery. St. Joseph’s Sanatorium in Silver City was converted into apartments, while Valmora became a residential treatment center for adolescents.

One by one the physicians died as well, LeRoy Peters in 1941 and Frank Mera in 1970. When Carl Gellenthien died in 1989, his epitaph spoke to the passing of an era: “He Came a Lunger, He Left a Legacy.” ■

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