ON March 10, 1840, Josiah Gregg and the men in his wagon caravan journeying back to the states pitched camp near a ravine on the prairie. Since the night was cold and blustery, the men on sentinel sought comfort by building a roaring campfire. They all drew around its warmth for a time, until suddenly bullets came shooting into their midst. Not only had the sentinels revealed their location to prowling Indians by building their bonfire, they were so engrossed in conversation that they neglected their duties entirely and did not hear the encroaching enemy. What were they discussing? What could have been so captivating and enthralling that they inadvertently jeopardized the safety of the entire caravan? Gregg revealed that the watch had gathered around the comfortable fire and “commenced ‘spinning long yarns’ about Mexican fandangos, and black-eyed damsels.’”¹

Fandangos were a flamboyant display of the Santa Fe culture and were held on an almost nightly basis. They attracted the attention of nearly every visitor from the United States, many of whom were fascinated with the ubiquitous custom. Joseph Pratt Allyn, an American Trail traveler writing under the alias “Putnam,” wrote in a letter in November 1863: “There is one institution that affords all the amusement here, save gambling, that cannot be overlooked, as it furnished the material for nine tenths of the opinions strangers form of the people: this is the baile or fandango. These entertainments take place nightly in some part of the town . . . .”² Allyn suggested that the institutions of gambling and the fandango largely comprised outsiders’ first impressions of Santa Fe and its people.

Gregg wrote that from his observations the term fandango does not necessarily apply to one specific dance, but usually describes “those ordinary assemblies where dancing and frolicking are carried on.” He differentiates the fandango from the baile or ball which he observed to be “of a higher grade.”³ New Mexico Territorial Secretary W. W. H. Davis, who traveled to Santa Fe in late 1853 and later wrote a book about his experiences, noted: “In New Mexico the general name of all assemblies where dancing is the principal amusement is fandango, which is not, as many suppose, a particular dance.”⁴
Originally the term “fandango” referred to a dance brought into the West Indies by the blacks of Guinea. It was often used to describe “any sort of dance of a low order, but should be applied to a dance of the common people written in three-eight time.” This dance was so practiced in the Spanish colonies in the Americas that it became “nationalized.” However, in journal entries and accounts of United States citizens traveling to Santa Fe, the words baile and fandango appear to be used almost interchangeably.

Gregg remarked that almost immediately upon arrival to Santa Fe, the wagoners and traders, particularly those who were new to the Santa Fe Trail and trade, “flocked to the numerous fandangos” which were held “regularly . . . after the arrival of the caravan.” In fact, one prairie traveler wrote that the feasts and bailes made the entire trip worth the trouble and were “rich compensation . . . for the hardships” endured.

The fandango was a way of socializing and celebrating, and it was a national pastime embraced by all. Gregg noted that fandangos were “very frequent” as dancing was enjoyed by all classes and age groups throughout the country. On October 9, 1847, the Santa Fe Republican ran an announcement: “Something New. Hovey and Co., at the Billiard Saloon, east end of Main Street, will give a Fandango on Tuesday evening. Good music, good wine and pretty girls.” The editor admitted that the announcement was “patently Anglo-Saxon,” but pointed out the underlying truth–everyone was welcome to attend a fandango. Instead of published announcements, Allyn wrote that a “bright light on the roof or in front of the portalles” typically signaled fandangos. Often a parade of the musicians around the plaza served as both an announcement of a fandango and a general invitation.

George C. Sibley, leader of the congressionally-funded government survey of the Santa Fe Trail, 1825-1827, revealed in his diary that fandangos and bailes were held almost nightly. From December 7-31, 1825, Sibley personally attended at least nine fandangos. He wrote that, on the 21st, the fandango was given by the priest, while at the one held on Christmas Eve “the people dance and prayed all night.” His entry for Wednesday 29 December covers all of the important topics: “Fandango at Gov[erno]r [Antonio] Narbona’s. Fine day. The measles getting common here.” He succinctly addressed his social life, the weather, and general health. In his New Year’s Eve entry, he
wrote of attending another fandango at Governor Narbona’s that evening with one to follow the next night, and still one more the following night.¹⁴ The third one was to be hosted by the Americans at the governor's house.¹⁵ From these entries, the reader learns that fandangos were held by nearly anyone from the clergy to city officials to foreigners. They were held in celebration of holidays or for no reason at all on a regular weeknight.

The frequency with which fandangos were held raises the question of cost. Few direct references to the cost of hosting a fandango are available. One visitor to Santa Fe wrote that the postmaster had created a reading room as an alternative form of entertainment to the fandangos. Many magazines and newspapers, brought in on a weekly basis, were available in the “pleasant” and “elegant” rooms. In spite of the costs of the reading material and elegant furnishings, the writer notes that the establishment of the reading room was much less expensive than the fandangos.¹⁶ Allyn reveals in one of his letters that an extremely elaborate fandango held in Peralto, one of the “wealthiest and most aristocratic places,” near Albuquerque, wherein the “resources of the neighborhood were evidently exhausted” in the decoration of the dancehall. He writes that this particular dance cost almost a thousand dollars.¹⁷

Clearly fandangos were a common and distinctive aspect of Santa Fe and southwestern culture. They were held with great frequency and seemingly considerable cost. But what made them so memorable? What was the actual setting of a fandango?

Santa Fe trader James Josiah Webb, who joined the trade in the 1840s, left a description in his memoirs: “A Mexican fandango in those days was a curiosity. The sala, or dancing hall, [was] from twenty to thirty feet long, and fifteen to eighteen feet wide, with sometimes benches on the sides (but frequently without seats of any kind) and packed full, only leaving sufficient space through the center for the couples to waltz through, up and down. When the dance began, the men would place themselves in line on one side, and when the line was complete, the women would begin to rise and take their positions opposite the men, almost always in regular order without manifesting any choice of partners; and when the numbers were equal, the music would strike up and the dance proceed.”¹¹⁸

Joseph Pratt Allyn also furnished readers with a detailed description in his letters. He depicted a long, narrow room with a stage at one end, upon which the musicians play.
Benches encircled the room against the walls which were covered with cloth as high as the head to protect those in attendance from the whitewash; the floor was laid with carpet. The walls were decorated with candles, crucifixes, and “an occasional cheap print either of a saint or woman.” Early in the evening, the female dancers waited on the benches chaperoned by “horrid, ugly-looking women in uglier clothes.”

Ruth Laughlin Barker, a Santa Fe historian, echoed this description, also writing of the long narrow room and cloth covered walls ringed by benches. She wrote that mothers attended their daughters as it was “unheard of” for a boy to escort a girl to a dance. The girls waited on the benches to be claimed by a partner.

The fandangos were usually open to the general public, and Josiah Gregg reported that anyone and everyone attended. At a fandango, people from every walk of life intermingled with one another: “From the gravest priest to the buffoon, from the richest nabob to the beggar—fror the governor to the ranchero—fror the soberest matron to the flippant belle—from the grandest senora to the concinera—all take part in this exhilarating amusement.”

Albert Pike provided a colorful description of his first experience in New Mexico in 1832: “On the evening after my arrival in the village, I went to a fandango. I saw the men and women dancing waltzes, and drinking whisky together; and in another room, I saw the mountebank open. It is a strange site—a Spanish fandango. Well dressed women—(they call them ladies)—harlots, priests, thieves, half-breed Indians— all spinning round together in the waltz. Here, a filthy, ragged fellow with a half shirt, a pair of leather breeches, and long dirty woolen stockings, and Apache moccasins, was hanging and whirling round with the pretty wife of Pedro Vigil; and there, the priest was dancing with La Altegracia, who paid her husband a regular sum to keep out of the way, and so lived with an American.”

Webb provided similar commentary: “I have witnessed,” he wrote, “some most ludicrous scenes at these fandangos. It was not anything uncommon or surprising to see the most elaborately dressed and aristocratic woman at the ball dancing with a peon dressed only in his shirt and trousers open from the hip down, with very wide and full drawers underneath, and frequently barefoot, but usually with moccasins. And such disparity of ages! On one occasion I saw at a ball given by Governor Armijo an old man
of eighty or over dancing with a child not over eight or ten. I could not help the reflection
that it was a dance of the cradle and the grave. They do literally dance from the cradle to
the grave.”

Davis observed the same things: “All New Mexicans are exceedingly fond of
dancing. . . . Every class and rank in society participate in the amusement, and very small
children are seen whirling in the waltz and tripping in the dance with the same gusto as
their more mature companions.”

It must have been a truly astounding intermingling of society because Allyn also
commented on the variety of people in attendance: “old women and young girls,
mistresses and servants, mothers and children, the richest silken robes, the plainest calico,
beauty and ugliness, the richest and the poorest, military and civil, all sandwiched
together.”

This strange intermingling of all different classes and types carried over onto the
dance floor. Allyn explained that any man could ask any woman present to dance, and
she could not refuse him: “The Mexican dance is the most complete democracy in
practice I know of.” He stated that it was not uncommon to see “the wife of a millionaire”
decked in silks and diamonds twirling in the arms of the poorly-dressed farmhand. He
seems to excuse this behavior with the assertion that due to the vast amount of
intermarriage, nearly everyone was somehow related, and therefore the rich woman and
poor man were probably family.

The fandango was truly a family affair. Mothers and their young children also
lined the benches to watch the dancers. Allyn wrote of Indians, priests, foreigners, city
officials, and others in attendance, and made a special note regarding the presence of a
Mormon girl.

Davis described an unusual practice that occurred at fandangos during the Lenten
season: “During the season of Lent there prevails a custom of the baile-going people
providing themselves with egg-shells filled with Cologne water, and other sweet-smelling
articles, which they break over the heads of their friends as a matter of fun, and the
operation is looked upon as a capital joke.” Davis did not think it very funny when it
happened to him, but he later joined in and returned the favor.
Richard Wilson, another Trail traveler, noted that many dancehalls or *salas* had earthen floors, and that after “the giddy waltz” the dust from the floor filled the room, which “gave a mysterious and romantic effect to this assembly room stampedo.”³⁰ Allyn also declared that, between the smoke from cigars and *cigarritos* and the dust in the air, the huge flag hung on the far end of the dance hall “was as much obscured as by the smoke of battle.”³¹

Very few women from the U.S. traveled over the road to Santa Fe prior to the 1850s, and Susan Shelby Magoffin, 19-year-old wife of trader Samuel Magoffin, was one of those few and the only one who kept a detailed diary of her journey. She also witnessed and commented on the fandango (unfavorably, noting that she attended but had not “joined it myself”) in her diary entries for September 10-11, 1846. “Lieut. [William] Warner has waited on me this A. M. with an invitation to attend a Spanish ball given by the officers to the traders. As the only *traderess*, it would be offending in me after so polite a request, not to exhibit myself at the *managerie*, along with other bipeds of curiosity. . . . I went in of course somewhat prepared to see; as I have often heard of such a show, I knew in a measure what to look for. First the ballroom, the walls of which were hung and fancifully decorated with the ‘stripes and stars,’ was opened to my view–there were before me numerous objects of the biped species, dressed in the seven rain-bow colours variously contrasted. . . .”³²

Susan commented further on the dress. “*Las Senoras y Senoritas* were dressed in silks, satins, gingham & lawns, embroidered crape shawls, fine rabozos–and decked with various showy ornaments, such as hugh necklaces, countless rings, combs, bows of ribbands, red and other coloured handkerchiefs, and other fine *fancy* articles.”³³ It was somewhat difficult to see the dancers, however, for “they were entirely enveloped, on the first view in a cloud of smoke, and while some were circling in a mazy dance others were seated around the room next the wall enjoying the scene before them, and quietly puffing, both males and females their little *cigarritas* a delicate cigar made with a very little tobacco rolled in a corn shuck or bit of paper. . . . *El Senor Vicario* [the priest] was there to grace the gay halls with his priestly robes. . . . There was “Dona Tula” the principal *monte-bank keeper* in Santa Fé, a stately dame of a certain age, the possessor of a portion of that shrewd sense and fascinating manner necessary to allure the wayward,
inexperienced youth to the hall of final ruin.” After commenting on several of the army officers and their behavior, Susan noted, “in that corner sits a dark-eyed Senora with a human footstool; in other words with her servant under her feet—a custom I am told, when they attend a place of the kind to take a servant along and while sitting to use them as an article of furniture.”

Susan later attended another fandango at the Palace of the Governors, presented to the army officers by the “appointed officials and citizen merchants.” She again described the women. “They were dressed in the Mexican style; large sleeves, short waists, ruffled skirts, and no bustles—which latter looks exceedingly odd in this day of grass skirts and pillows. All danced and smoke cigarettes, from the old woman with false hair and teeth, (Dona Tula), to the little child. 'The Cuna' [cradle] was danced, and was indeed beautiful; it commences with only two and ends when the floor gets too full for any more to come on.”

Susan observed: “The music consisted of a gingling guitar, and violin with the occasional effort to chime in an almost unearthly voice.” The music, according to Josiah Gregg, was played on the fiddle, bandolin or guitarra, occasionally accompanied by a little drum. Wilson mentioned a “ragged minstrel . . . twanging the strings of a crazy guitar,” also accompanied by a drum. Barker stated that the musicians were often “a blind fiddler and a one-eye guitarist” occasionally accompanied by an accordion player. Sometimes a “master of ceremonies,” called a bastonero, would preside from the stage next to the musicians, while a “privileged jester” would ad lib musical verses about “prominent persons” on the dance floor.

Davis also commented on the music: “They dance and waltz with beauty and ease to the music of the guitar and violin, and sometimes these instruments are accompanied by a small drum, called a tombé. Some of the musicians play with considerable skill, and at times I have listened to performers who would have been deemed respectable anywhere. It is customary for one or more of the players to accompany the instruments with his voice, singing impromptu words which he adapts to the music and the occasion. Most of the persons in the room receive in turn a passing compliment in his doggerel, and when the notice is particularly flattering he expects a real (twelve and a half cents) in return, and will not refuse a quarter.”
For refreshments, Allyn wrote of cakes being distributed and champagne that “flowed like water.”42 Both Allyn and Gregg remarked that inebriety was not noted among the people and did not seem to be a problem for the society.43 At the especially lavish fandango in Peralto, Allyn reported further refreshments of pork, oysters, cheese, sponge cake, and coffee. He snidely remarked, however, that “the crockery was not all of the same set and the spoons were not all the same size.”44

Beyond the mismatched serving pieces, Allyn also gave a fairly deprecatory report of the ladies present at a Santa Fe fandango, writing: “I have never seen a really handsome woman among the Mexicans present.”45 He went on, “Although none of the women seen here are respectable or reputable, tried by the American standard, a vulgar word or gesture is never known . . . You see many very expensive toilettes, but rarely an elegantly dressed woman.”46 He revealed his measuring stick to be the “American standard” and further gave himself away when he deemed the ladies of Albuquerque more elegant because they were more white of skin and regular of feature.47

He described an officer at a Santa Fe fandango who was disgusted when the young mother, with whom he had just finished dancing and flirting, silenced her crying baby “by relieving its hunger in the natural way with the most perfect abandon.”48 He most certainly would not have seen such a thing at a dance held at home in the States.

Despite his harsh judgments of the Santa Fe women, Allyn seems to have been in attendance at more than a few fandangos. However unforgiving of Santa Fe women he was, these women seemed to embrace, or at least overlook, any American shortcomings. “Dress,” he wrote, “seems to be of no account. A lady waltzes with you in your heavy horseman’s boots and dust-begrimmed clothes as graciously as though you were robed like a prince. Their patience is inimitable. I have seen a pretty girl dancing the light vendetta, which is a sort of hop waltz, with a clumsy American in heavy boots, at the evident risk of having her feet crushed if he stepped on them and yet managing to take him through somehow creditably.”49 Regardless of his mixed impressions of Santa Fe women, Allyn apparently enjoyed himself in their capable arms at many fandangos.

Richard Wilson viewed the Mexican women in an entirely different light, describing them as “slight, and almost faultless in form, with a ‘laughing devil’ dancing in eyes of visible darkness.”50 He praised their “profusion of dark hair,” “cheeks ripened
by sunlight,” “a foot like a fairy’s,” and “a step . . . like a fawn’s.” He described how the poor and rich women alike decorate themselves with bangles of gold or silver, jewels or colored glass, silk or cotton, depending on her status, but equally beautiful.

Like Wilson, Ruth Barker took the romantic approach, describing the girls present at a fandango as “typical Spanish girls, their soft black eyes looking out of oval faces at a happy, innocent world.” She also focused on the aesthetic practices of young ladies, detailing a cosmetic applied to the face which resulted in a pale lavender cast. The cheeks were rouged by pricking them with a rough mullen leaf, or with another homemade concoction called allegria. They washed their hair with amole root to heighten the blue-black sheen. Before holiday bailes, they prepared their skin with clay masks with “no false modesty about appearing hideous and unsmiling for six weeks” before removing it. Josiah Gregg also described the clay masks worn for weeks to prepare the skin for a particularly important feast or ball.

Gregg withheld description and judgment of the women present at a fandango, other than commenting on their particularly intolerable “petty vice” of smoking. He mentioned that it is not uncommon to see a woman whirling on the dance floor “with a lighted cigarrito in her mouth.” In an earlier description of Santa Fe women, he remarked that they were “about as broad-featured as the veriest Indian,” and then almost begrudgingly admitted that they did “possess striking traits of beauty.” He noted their remarkably small feet and “handsome figures” but quickly called to attention the fact that they were corset-less.

Regardless of the Anglo-Americans’ impressions of Santa Fe women, the various writings reveal that the Americans were welcomed, expected to participate, and perhaps even celebrated at the fandangos. Allyn explained, “There was a baile in the evening, and as strangers, we had to go.” He wrote in another letter that the fandangos seemed to be “supported by the Americans.” It is also clear from his writing that he was an active participant, dancing and staying all night. George Sibley certainly did his part, attending at least nine fandangos in less than a month, and helping host another. Richard Wilson declared that the arrival of himself and presumably his companions created “quite a sensation” among the “youth and beauty” with a good deal of “rustling,” “whispering,” and “glancing.”
However, fandangos were not always in tune with the “happy, innocent world” Ruth Barker described. In fact, several accounts reveal violent disturbances, particularly between females. In a January 1864 edition of the *Weekly of the Wild Frontier*, a newspaper of Santa Fe, an article was published under the headline “SHAMEFUL”: “We have heard of what we hope never again will occur in Santa Fe. It is, that at a fandango, a few evenings since, two of the females became insulted and enraged at each other, and that American men present endeavored to inflame the ill will and violence of the two women, the one against the other, and that a ring was formed and knives placed in the hands of each, for a desperate fight.”

Barker also described squabbles fueled by “quick-flaming jealousy” resulting in a severed ear or pistol shots fired outside the *sala*. She wrote in a tolerant tone, “The orchestra played on and on through the warm afternoon and night, interrupted now and then by fist fights and a flash of knives outside the door. . . . Police dated the ‘nice, quiet dance’ with one man killed and three severely wounded.” Webb, writing about the 1840s, gave a somewhat different picture: “. . . I have never seen anything lascivious or want of decorum and self-respect in any woman in a *fandango*, whatever might be her reputation for virtue outside. I have known of disorders and serious brawls in *fandangos*, but it was almost invariably where Americans and whiskey were found in profusion.”

Allyn, in Santa Fe 20 years later, alluded to feminine violence, remarking, “the traditional fiery jealousy of [Mexican women’s] Mediterranean ancestry has not all been extinguished by the darker currents of the Aztec blood.” He also mentioned a “severe fight” between two women, caused by jealousy.

Two authors suggest that actual fights between women were not the only hazards of fandangos. William R. Goulding noted in his journal in 1849 that, though he had never seen more genteel ladies, he could not help but remark upon their practice in “the artillery of the eyes.” Richard Wilson provided more details, offering warning after warning against women dancing at the fandango: “How charmingly she glances at the’’Americanos.’ ‘Take care!’ she’s fooling thee–beware!’ As she flits like a sylph from figure to figure so she flutters like a butterfly from heart to heart. The earthen floor is the arena of all her conquests–again we say, beware! . . . There's no such thing as a heart beating beneath that rain- bow-tinted zone–no softer sigh than that for conquest ever
heaves that gauze-veiled bosom.” Wilson’s warnings may be just a product of the romantic writing-style of the time, or perhaps his heart was one of the casualties incurred at a fandango.

Based upon the descriptions of fandangos made by prairie travelers in diaries and letters, it is no wonder that most of the wagon-travelers flocked to these dances upon arrival in Santa Fe. Clearly fandangos were the showcase of the Santa Fe and southwestern cultures. Lovely women, rousing music, delicious food, flowing spirits, and exhilarating dancing combined to create the fandango. They were held for major holidays or for no reason at all. They were family affairs where everyone was welcomed and treated as equals, regardless of occupation and station. Though the upper class flashed jewels and high-priced fashions, the lower class danced just as happily right beside them. Though most fandangos offered a good time, the notorious Hispanic passion could occasionally lead to vicious fights; however, those in attendance took these outbreaks in stride. Strangers and foreigners were not only invited but expected to come. They were heartily enveloped into the jubilant atmosphere of the fandango. It is no wonder the men in Josiah Gregg’s wagon train lost themselves in conversation of fandangos that cold night in March of 1840.

NOTES
3. Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, 170.
6. Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, 78.
8. Gregg, Commerce of the Prairies, 170.
13. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 137.
26. Ibid., 140-141.
28. Ibid., 130.
33. Ibid., 124.
34. Ibid., 118-123.
35. Ibid., 143, 145.
36. Ibid., 123-124.
37. J. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 170.
42. Strate, *West by Southwest*, 139, 141.
43. Ibid., 139; Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 171.
44. Strate, *West by Southwest*, 142.
45. Ibid., 130.
46. Ibid., 131.
47. Ibid., 139.
48. Ibid., 141.
49. Ibid., 150.
51. Ibid.
52. Ibid., 156.
54. Ibid., 212.
55. Ibid.
56. Ibid., 213.
57. J. Gregg, *Commerce of the Prairies*, 154.
58. Ibid., 170.
59. Ibid., 171.
60. Ibid., 153.
62. Ibid., 129.
63. Ibid., 150.
64. K. Gregg, *Road to Santa Fe*, 134-137.
68. Ibid., 200.
71. La Farge, *Santa Fe*, vii.
72. Wilson, *Short Raveling from a Long Yarn*, 156.
New Mexico is a state located in Southwest United States of America. During the quest, Percy Jackson, Thalia Grace, Zoë Nightshade, Bianca di Angelo and Grover Underwood stopped for a while in Cloudcroft, New Mexico. After Zoë, Grover and Thalia go to get food, the group is ambushed by skeleton warriors. Grover feels the wild calling him. At the same time, Erymanthian boar flies out of the bushes and attacks everything. It kills skeletons and attacks to the group. Percy saves the team. Grover tells