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Two friends who believe in ferries

The Southwest Ferry Project celebrates the heyday of ferries in the state

John Knoll | For The New Mexican

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One quick glance into the eyes of Gary Cascio and Bryan Brown as they talk about their interest in ferries and there's no doubt they are full of passionate intensity.

High-school friends from Shreveport, La., Cascio and Brown have been ferry freaks since the early '70s when they were roommates at Louisiana Tech University and criss-crossed the state for the opportunity to ride a ferry across a bayou or river.

"There's no doubt a psychological reason why we're interested in ferries," Brown said, "The best explanation I can give for my interest is that they're romantic. We're nuts about ferries."

Brown, 56, a retired biologist and author of two books about the natural history of the Grand Canyon, lives in Salt Lake City, while Cascio, 57, a Santa Fe resident, is a graphic designer and photographer.

They got together last week in Java Joe's at DeVargas Plaza to talk about their Southwest Ferry Project, something they hope will evolve into a book about ferries in New Mexico, Colorado, Utah and Arizona.

"I thought there might be a handful of ferries in New Mexico," Cascio said. "I was astonished when our research discovered over 30 ferry locations in New Mexico, 17 in both Colorado and Arizona and 22 in Utah."

There's has been little research into the history of ferries in the Southwest and the history is disappearing, Brown said.

"I told a Colorado state archivist there were ferries in Colorado, and she said, 'I don't think Colorado ever had a ferry.' She was dismayed when I told her we have already discovered many ferries in her state."

Brown said he talked to Marc Simmons, an eminent New Mexican historian, and Simmons was surprised to learn about the number of ferry crossings in New Mexico.

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The "heyday" of ferries in New Mexico was between 1870 and the 1920s, Cascio said. Their research discovered New Mexico's first commercial ferry operated in the Mesilla area in the early 1860s.

At the present time, the only ferry in the Southwest is operated by the Utah Department of Transportation at Hall's Crossing on Lake Powell in the Glen Canyon Recreation Area.

Cascio said changing economic conditions, especially the building of highway and railroad bridges, eliminated the need for ferries.

Initially, in the 1800s, ferries were made of cottonwood logs lashed together, Brown said. When the railroad arrived in the Southwest, redwood planks were shipped in from the Northwest and after World War II, steel ferries were built in Utah, but not New Mexico.

After spending hundreds of hours researching ferries in libraries and state archives, they discovered there had been at least four ferry boats operating in Northern New Mexico.

There were ferries at San Ildefonso, Cochiti, Buckman's crossing and Peña Blanca.

"Each ferry crossing was a place of high drama," Brown said. "Outlaws, Indians, the cavalry, cattle and stagecoaches were all ferried across rivers. And crossing a river was dangerous."

In the 1870s, two ferrymen and two Native American women were hit and killed by lightning at the San Ildefonso crossing, Cascio said.

Realizing there are ferries yet to be discovered, Brown and Cascio are interested in hearing from people who have knowledge of ferry crossings, or related stories. Their Web site address is: southwestferryproject.com.

The more research they do, the more they realize there's more research to do. "We feel like a book is at least a year away," Brown said.

If people want to contribute to the Southwest Ferry Project, they can purchase a T-shirt with "I believe in ferries" stenciled across the front of the shirt.

"I guess we're on a crusade to make people believe in ferries," Cascio said. "Rivers have been, and are, the lifeblood of the Southwest. Our project, hopefully, will make a positive historical contribution to a subject that has been ignored."

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