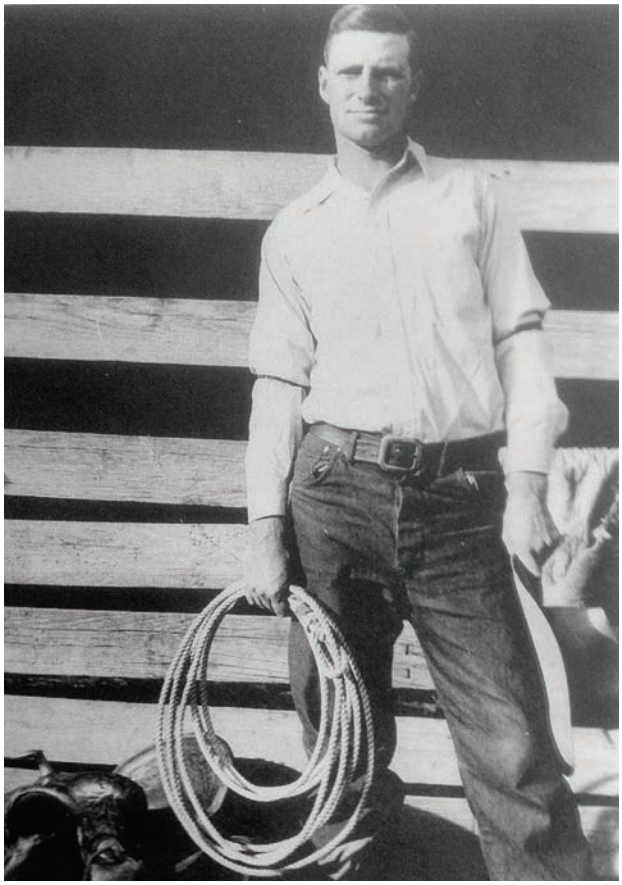
OCTOBER 1965

Many of New Mexico's creative types claim that the state inspires them to greater heights of productivity. One of this magazine's most prolific and successful writers, John L. Sinclair (1902–1993), took it further: "I would not have written had I not lived in the Southwest," he told Cynthia Farah, in her book *Literature & Landscape: Writers of the Southwest*. A Scot who relocated to New Mexico, Sinclair worked as a cowboy for 14 years before moving on to the business of wrangling words. His portable Olympia typewriter has a place of honor in our editorial office—a quiet exhortation to maintain Sinclair's legacy.

PHOTO OF JOHN SINCLAIR FROM *A COWBOY WRITER IN NEW MEXICO: THE MEMOIRS OF JOHN L. SINCLAIR* (UNM PRESS, 1996).



At Home at the End of the World

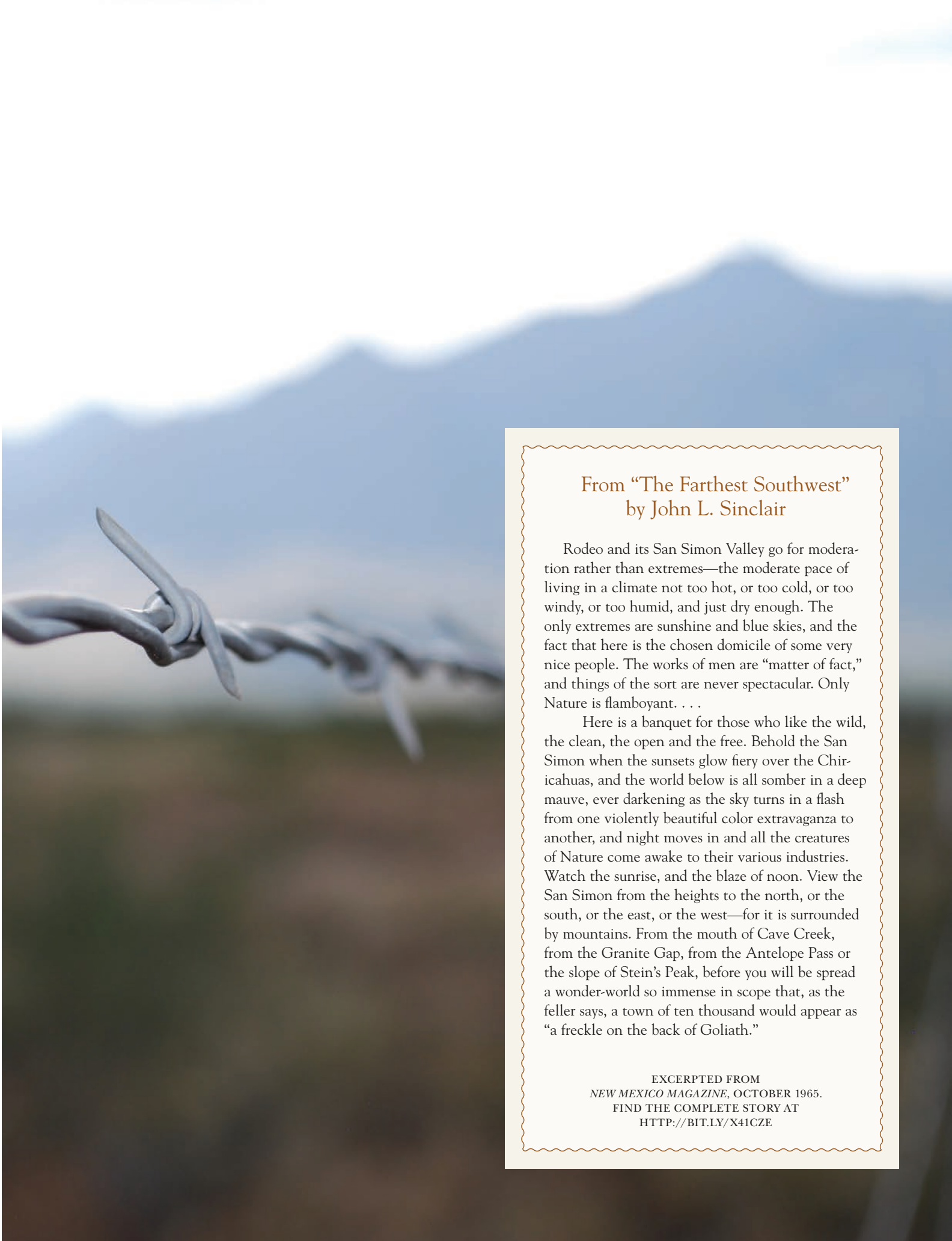
For 50 years, John L. Sinclair wrote fond, in-depth reports on various New Mexico locales for this magazine. In October 1965, he immersed himself in little-known, far-flung Rodeo—a place full of history, characters, and spirit that are all still discernible 45 years later.

STORY & PHOTOGRAPHY BY PETER BG SHOEMAKER

APPROACHING THE PASS, THE blacktop ahead glassy with the heat and the sky and hours of driving, I decide this is the place. There are no other cars, and aside from what can only be an adolescent hawk yet untutored in the role silence has in stealth, it is quiet.

I get out and stand in the middle of the road, looking down into the valley. My truck starts to tick softly in the heat, chamisa and saltbush thick to the undercarriage, and the hawk, offended, glides away. I look again at the picture—photocopied and creased and chilled from the air-conditioning.

It is an image of a young man—not yet 30—standing in front of a rough-hewn pine fence. He's confident, his right hip cocked. In one hand a coiled lariat, in the other a weathered-gray Stetson. At his feet, a saddle. He stares into the camera square-jawed, as if that is the very definition of a cowboy, the slightest flicker of a smile corralled. Some years later he will stop spending his days wet and cold or hot and dusty, driving cattle across grasslands as vast as his family's native country. He will stop sleeping on thin mattresses on which his is only the most recent presence in a long line of men before him. He will give up meals enjoyed in a circle of the like-minded and like-wearied around a campfire. In place of all these things, he will become a teller



From "The Farthest Southwest" by John L. Sinclair

Rodeo and its San Simon Valley go for moderation rather than extremes—the moderate pace of living in a climate not too hot, or too cold, or too windy, or too humid, and just dry enough. The only extremes are sunshine and blue skies, and the fact that here is the chosen domicile of some very nice people. The works of men are "matter of fact," and things of the sort are never spectacular. Only Nature is flamboyant. . . .

Here is a banquet for those who like the wild, the clean, the open and the free. Behold the San Simon when the sunsets glow fiery over the Chiricahuas, and the world below is all somber in a deep mauve, ever darkening as the sky turns in a flash from one violently beautiful color extravaganza to another, and night moves in and all the creatures of Nature come awake to their various industries. Watch the sunrise, and the blaze of noon. View the San Simon from the heights to the north, or the south, or the east, or the west—for it is surrounded by mountains. From the mouth of Cave Creek, from the Granite Gap, from the Antelope Pass or the slope of Stein's Peak, before you will be spread a wonder-world so immense in scope that, as the feller says, a town of ten thousand would appear as "a freckle on the back of Goliath."

EXCERPTED FROM
NEW MEXICO MAGAZINE, OCTOBER 1965.
FIND THE COMPLETE STORY AT
HTTP://BIT.LY/X41CZE

View of Rodeo today, and the mountains that frame New Mexico's western edge.

of stories—as an historian, a conservator, and, most influentially, as a writer.

When that picture of John L. Sinclair was taken, in 1931 at Casey's Ranch in the Hondo Valley, the disinherited son of a Scottish aristocrat was already a New Mexican at heart. He'd stopped in Clovis, a flag stop, 10 years earlier, on his way to British Columbia from back east. Stepping onto a platform built on land that had enjoyed statehood for less than 20 years, Sinclair gave up the idea—his family's idea—of ranching in Canada. He saw ponies. Men in hats. Spurs. Beautiful women. The exotic. Home.

For the next 65 or so years, Sinclair roamed New Mexico widely and loved it deeply. Although he eventually wrote three novels, he was best known for the stories he wrote over 50 years for *New Mexico Magazine*. He got his real writing start with the magazine, and it was there where he wrote—often passionately—of small towns, their geography, and their people. He truly loved the places and characters that made mid-century New Mexico's reputation, and that continue to shape how we see ourselves today.

It's why I found myself under a sky so blue it was tinged with black, granite walls of the pass rising to either side, imagining the imaginings of a Sinclair 40 years ago. In 1965—retired again, this time from managing the Coronado Monument—he moved with his wife to the town of Rodeo. Once there, he did what he always did: drank deep of a new place and its people. He published an article in October of that year in *New Mexico Magazine*, and titled it "The Farthest Southwest." For someone who loves the extremes of the state, such a title was all the invitation I needed to go exploring.

RODEO IS THREE-QUARTERS OF A mile from the Arizona border, in the bootheel of New Mexico. That makes it many things, among them the town that's precisely the farthest southwest in the state. Sinclair had a knack for titles. Short, evocative, even a little seductive. "Upstairs Albuquerque" for Placitas, "Broken Hearts Valley" for the Estancia, "Sun and Sanctuary" for all of New Mexico. So, in

John L. Sinclair's 52 articles for *New Mexico Magazine* appeared in issues over five decades, including those at right: July 1938, March 1947, December 1957, December 1959, December 1961, March 1967, March 1977, and February 1980.

some sense, I knew what I was getting into. But short, evocative, and seductive titles can often hide as much as they show. For instance, this part of the world saw the passage of The Kid and his cohorts in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, set a decade or so before Rodeo's founding. No one before or after has been able to describe so unsparingly the raw and violent nature of Southwestern landscape.

And so, standing at the pass, looking down into the San Simon Valley, seeing, as Sinclair described, "a world of mighty distances, abrupt contrasts, pinnacled summits," and the faintest glimmers of a town marked by a water tower, I wonder what of his "domicile of very nice people" I will find in such a place.

Creosote and mesquite slowly give way to grass—not really the pampas of his article, but a powerful reminder of the homesteaders and ranchers who so impressed Sinclair. This isn't a place where, absent hard work, settled life thrives. A few buildings here and there, some in good repair, some nothing more than tangles of bleached wood and blackened iron. A road winding off to the east, over the mountains to the next valley. A road to the west, to Arizona. And then, Rodeo.

Like countless towns across the nation, Rodeo grew up in service to the rivers of iron that fed and clothed a country growing sea to sea. Cattlemen converged on Rodeo and its access to the El Paso & Southern line. Then, in 1915, Arizona went dry and Rodeo became the watering hole of necessity. The town, Sinclair deadpans, "wept sympathetic tears for a beloved neighbor's predicament." Rodeo boomed, and then, with national prohibition and the rerouting of the trains, it slowed. Now the tracks are gone; so, too, the station. A single tavern lights the highway after dark.

Yet Sinclair's Rodeo wasn't a ghost town, nor is it now. It's a small town. Nine streets, half that many developed. There are fewer places of business now than when Sinclair lived here. Of the places he mentioned—markets, gas stations, cafes—only one is still recognizable, and long ago ceased doing what its sign advertises. But Rodeo is a place where, in the midst of the mountains, the skies, and the wide-open spaces of possibility—what Sinclair called the flamboyance of nature—people establish roots, build lives, and create opportunity.

Rodeo is three-quarters of a mile from the Arizona border, in the bootheel of New Mexico. That makes it many things, among them precisely the farthest southwest.

Sinclair was fascinated with local legend J. A. Chenowith. A preacher and rancher right out of McCarthy's imagination, Chenowith was as good, Sinclair said, "with a gun as he was with Leviticus." He was also, I later learned, the man who offered Geronimo his last meal before the Apache leader's surrender in 1886, just south of town. The Reverend was gone, his ranch lost in the Great Depression, long before Sinclair moved in. But he symbolized for the writer the spirit that fed Rodeo.

IN DIANN MATTESON'S LIVING ROOM, five minutes after arriving in town, I meet a guy clearly enjoying his life. Wearing a two-day beard and a smile, he's a storyteller. The story he's telling, of his great-grandfather, sounds more and more familiar as he goes on. Finally, I stop him. "What's your last name?" I ask.

Ten years ago, working from a tip, Nathan Lynn

NEED TO KNOW

WHERE TO STAY

Mountain Valley Lodge. Try for the rustic Cowboy Room. 223 U.S. 80. (575) 520-3731; mountainvalleylodgesite.com. For larger parties, the **Painted Pony Resort** is just outside of town. Spacious estate, splendid caretaker. 257 Painted Pony Road. (703) 281-9559; paintedponyresort.com

WHERE TO EAT

Rodeo Grocery and Cafe. Breakfast, lunch, and basic groceries. 195 N.M. 80. (575) 557-2295

The Rodeo Tavern. Ribeye on the weekends, shrimp feast on Wednesday nights. 181 US 80. (575) 557-2229; rodeonewmexico.com/tavern.html

VISIT

The Chiricahua Gallery. Eclectic mix of local painting, sculpture, and crafts. A cooperative. 5 Pine St. (575) 557-2225; chiricahuagallery.org

Roger McKasson Studio-Gallery. Bronze sculpture and Western paintings with a twist. 5 Custie Ave. bronzeman280@yahoo.com; rogermckasson.com

Chiricahua Desert Museum. Extensive botanical garden and a collection of live desert reptiles, plus a fantastic 20-foot-tall statue of a rattlesnake tail. U.S. 80 & Portal Rd. (575) 557-5757; chiricahuadesertmuseum.com

Sew What Club. Social and civic events and hiking. Ask around town for hiking information. portalrodeo.com/sew-what-club.html

Please note: Telephone and cell-phone service in Rodeo can be spotty.

Chenowith returned to Rodeo and bought back his great-grandfather's ranch. He's fixed it up. He's back in Rodeo; the family is back in Rodeo. We laugh at the odds. Later that night, at the tavern, he'll buy me a drink. The spirit's intact.

Elsewhere, too. The Sew What Club, the collection of Rodeo (and now some Arizona) women that so impressed Sinclair, still runs things, and puts on a series of intellectual and social events. I did get some rolled eyes speaking with current members when I read Sinclair's comment that the "members have all the stamina and determination of the late Reverend Chenowith, though none of his colorful vocabulary." From what I hear of the group's legendary hikes into the Chiricahua Mountains, I expect things have changed on the latter front.

Bill and Nancy Cloudt offer a lesson in local history at their cafe and grocery, and are happy to share pictures that span generations. Elsewhere, there's a small, informal group of folks, led in part by Matteson and Bruce Thompson, caretaker of the Painted Pony Resort, to tell the world about a place Sinclair described as a "wonder-world," featuring some of the best birding in the U.S., the finest hiking in New Mexico, and the deepest quiet and prettiest skies in the world.

That night, after the tavern closes and only a single light shines into the desert, I leave my room and follow Matteson's advice. I lie down in the middle of the highway—still warm from the afternoon

Before it became Chiricahua Gallery, this building was first a saloon, then a church. Locals like to say that "it progressed from booze, to the Bible, to the brush."

sun—and stare into those skies and the cathedral of stars. I am reminded of something Sinclair wrote at the end of the '50s about the skies and nighttimes of New Mexico: that "civilized man is still a little afraid of the dark." Despite the coyotes gathered in the mesquite a hundred meters from me, imperceptible but for their chatter in the darkness, it isn't fear that I feel but a sort of longing.

Perhaps Rodeo wasn't such an unusual place in Sinclair's New Mexico. Now, of course, places like it disappear regularly, and very few parts of America still look as they did nearly a half-century ago. The economics are different, the politics are different, the culture is different. For us, Rodeo is the sort of place we think of when we think of a small town—the people, the ways of life. It's part of a shimmering past—inspiring not nostalgia but something far deeper, more fundamental, a thing we want to believe in. A thing we once did. Ponies, men in hats, the frontier, the exotic. Maybe it's not where we want to live, but for much of New Mexico, and for much of the nation, it's a place of beginnings, of origins. Home.

Peter BG Shoemaker is featured in "Storytellers," p. 6.