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CASIMIRO BARELA: A CASE STUDY OF  
CHICANO POLITICAL HISTORY IN COLORADO

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Al tratarse de mi raza,  
especialmente si se trata de discriminar,  
abduco de mis ideas politicas y me dedico a su  
defensa en todo tiempo y lugar.

--Casimiro Barela

Chicano social scientists for the past several years have started to uncover segments of Chicano history that have been previously overlooked and/or just simply neglected by previous academicians. One major area that remains a "well kept secret" is the political history of Chicanos, especially from 1836 through 1900.<sup>1</sup> Arthur F. Corwin states in his article, "Mexican American History: An Assessment," that, with the exception of a couple of authors, "There are virtually no political histories of Spanish-surnamed peoples in the modern Southwest."<sup>2</sup> Corwin suggests that there are twentieth century topics that could be researched for recent Chicano political history, such as the LULACS, Alonso Perales, George I. Sánchez, and Dennis Chávez. However, Corwin's superficial view also fails to recognize the political development and activities of Chicanos during the nineteenth century. Several Chicanos, during the mid-nineteenth century, became actively involved in pursuing the protection of Raza rights in the Southwest.<sup>3</sup> The protection mechanism developed immediately after 1848 following the conquest of the Southwest. From the conquest, Chicanos became subjected to newly implanted economic, social and political institutions. From these particular institutions emerged the

framework of colonial relations and patterns which have historically oppressed Chicanos and kept them powerless.<sup>4</sup> Here is where considerable research and analysis should be directed in efforts to develop new paradigms for positive action against colonialism. However, before a working analysis is formulated to adequately deal with colonialism, a historical perspective must be first achieved to provide the necessary foundation to build upon. Such is the purpose in this study of Casimiro Barela, "the perpetual Senator of Colorado." In addition, I hope the study will contribute to the growing body of Chicano historical knowledge, and in particular Chicano political history of the nineteenth century. I hope, also, the study will encourage other Chicanos to unravel the threads of the past and to "perhaps contribute to a structural analysis for positive action on behalf of the Chicano community."<sup>5</sup>

Casimiro Barela successfully managed to effectively infiltrate, and to a degree control, the political institution at the state level for approximately forty years (1872-1912). During this period, Casimiro directly defended and protected the rights of Chicanos in Colorado. Furthermore, he tried to protect the rights of Chicanos throughout the Southwest by insisting that the rights guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo be upheld. In Colorado, Casimiro was specifically responsible for having the Constitution of the state and its laws printed in the Spanish language, advocating bilingual-bicultural schooling, maximizing political pressure on the national government to guarantee the rights of Chicanos in the territory of Nuevo México and defending land grants in southern Colorado. As Casimiro often said, "Al tratarse de me raza, especialmente si se trata de discriminar, abdicó de mis ideas políticas y me dedico a su defensa en todo tiempo y lugar."<sup>6</sup>

Casimiro, eldest son of José María and María Abeyta de Barela, was born March 4, 1847, in the small village of Embudo (Dixon) Nuevo México.<sup>7</sup> The name Casimiro was taken from his great, great paternal grandfather Casimiro Varela (V and B were used interchangeably).<sup>8</sup> The elder Casimiro arrived in México from España. He later, with his family, traveled to California with the earliest colonization parties. The elder Casimiro and his son, Juan, accompanied Lieutenant José Moraga and others in establishing San Francisco on February 2, 1777.<sup>9</sup> From San Francisco, members of the family migrated to Los Angeles and to northern Nuevo México.<sup>10</sup>

Casimiro's schooling was more than most individuals acquired during the mid-nineteenth century. He received primary instruction from Antonio de Jesús Cruz consisting of oral religious recall; from Severiano Martínez, Casimiro learned to read.<sup>11</sup> After the family left Embudo and returned to Mora, general instruction was first provided by Juana Suazo de Simpson and by 1859 was under the direction of Padre Juan B. Salapointe (later Archbishop of Santa Fe).<sup>12</sup> In return for his schooling, Casimiro performed various house and church duties for his instructors.

The Barela family remained in Mora until December of 1866 when they migrated to Southern Colorado. In January 1867, the Barela family arrived at El Rito de San Francisco which is presently located twenty miles east of Trinidad, Colorado.<sup>13</sup> There the family engaged in livestock and merchandizing. Two years after the arrival of the Barela family in Colorado, Casimiro entered the political arena. In 1869, Casimiro was elected Justice of the Peace by his community, and in 1870, was elected County Assessor for Las Animas County.<sup>14</sup> In both offices, Casimiro proved to be quite competent, and, more importantly, slowly began acquiring the support of Chicanos in southern Colorado.<sup>15</sup>

In 1871, Casimiro was elected to represent Las Animas County in the territorial legislature, and was re-elected in 1873.<sup>16</sup> In 1875, Casimiro was selected as a delegate to attend the Constitutional Convention held in Denver, and subsequently in 1876 was elected Senator of the First General Assembly of the State of Colorado.<sup>17</sup> Further indication of strong support by Chicanos becomes evident as Casimiro was consecutively re-elected Senator until his resignation in December of 1912.

In both the 1871 and 1873 territorial legislatures, Casimiro's crucial concern was to insure that all laws be clearly understood by all residents for their own protection.<sup>18</sup> What had strongly influenced this position were racist hostilities encountered by New Mexicans (Chicanos and Indios) after the subjugation of Nuevo México on August 18, 1846, by the United States government.<sup>19</sup> Casimiro related to his biographer that on January 19, 1847, his family was forced to leave Mora, due to severe Anglo persecution against natives, and seek refuge in Embudo.<sup>20</sup> Hostilities against the native populace of Nuevo México became so severe that the populace finally revolted against the oppressive forces. The revolt began in Taos, Nuevo México on January 19, 1847 (the same day the Barelans left for Embudo) with the killing of both Anglos and Anglo sympathizers.<sup>21</sup> From the killings in Taos, the movement spread and became known as the Taos Revolt. Due to these overt hostilities, Casimiro wanted to insure that the incidents that had taken place in Nuevo México would not reoccur in Colorado. In the territorial legislature Casimiro strongly advocated to have the publication of laws also printed in Spanish since the majority of Chicanos in the territory understood only the Spanish language.<sup>22</sup> His desire did not become a reality in the territorial legislature. However, Casimiro was not to be denied and he pursued his ambition with even greater diligence in the Constitutional Convention.

As a delegate to the Constitutional Convention, Casimiro and two other Chicanos (José María García and Agapito Vigil) immediately began political maneuvers to have the constitution and its laws published in the native language of the Chicano populace. Finally, after considerable debate the following

resolution was adopted in the Constitution of the State (Article XVIII, section 8):

The General Assembly shall be provided for the publication of the laws passed at each session thereof; and until the year 1900 they shall cause to be published in Spanish and German a sufficient number of copies of said laws to supply that portion of the inhabitants of the state who speak those languages and who may be unable to read and understand the English language.<sup>23</sup>

Another critical issue that came before the Constitutional Convention was the question of suffrage. There had developed some support to have schooling and language qualifications for electors.<sup>24</sup> Casimiro quickly challenged this, as he related to his biographer, by stating "that no citizen of the state can be deprived of suffrage due to reason or cause of insufficient education nor due to inability of individuals to speak the English language."<sup>25</sup> Casimiro requested that if schooling and language requirements were to be prescribed by law, twenty-five years be allowed before the enforcement of such a law.<sup>26</sup> Casimiro argued that a twenty-five-year grace period would allow the younger generation the time necessary to receive an education and learn the English language. The resolution was passed and became part of the Constitution, however, with only a fifteen-year grace period (Article VII, section 3):

The General Assembly may prescribe, by law, an educational qualification for electors, but no such law shall take effect prior to the year of our Lord one-thousand eight-hundred and ninety (1890), and no qualified elector shall be thereby disqualified.<sup>27</sup>

During the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention, Casimiro had several times threatened to lead a movement composed of Chicanos against the constitution and subsequently delay statehood if his resolutions were not seriously considered. As the Constitutional Convention approached its conclusion, Casimiro emerged as the leading figure in Colorado dedicated to protecting and enforcing the rights of Chicanos.

Colorado's constitution was accepted by the populace and Colorado was admitted into the Union in 1876. With state elections pending, Casimiro was nominated by the Democratic Party as a candidate for the State Senate, and was successful due to Chicano support. In 1884, Casimiro proposed a project that would better educate Chicanos in the southern part of the state.<sup>28</sup> He believed that schooling institutions, especially at the elementary level, should first instruct Chicanitos in their native language and then slowly integrate the English language.<sup>29</sup> Through the bilingual process, Chicanitos would not only learn English, but at the same time, Chicanos would

be able to conserve and cultivate their own language, culture and identity. However, Casimiro's concept was too advanced for his time and unfortunately the project was not implemented. Even so, in 1893 Casimiro was able to appropriate \$25,000 for schools in Trinidad (southern Colorado) in order to provide a better schooling for Chicanos.<sup>30</sup>

During the 1880's, Casimiro became increasingly concerned for the native residents of the neighboring territory of Nuevo México. Nuevo México had not yet been incorporated into the Union. Furthermore, native Nuevo Mexicanos were being exploited, their lands were being systematically encroached upon and the Treaty of Guadalupe was not being enforced. In February 1889, Casimiro requested that Colorado support the territory of Nuevo México in its bid for statehood.<sup>31</sup> In the Senate, Casimiro raised the issue that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo promised admission for the conquered territories. He further pointed out that the Treaty specifically required that, as a condition for statehood, the populace be a certain number and not that it be anglo.<sup>32</sup> On February 28, 1889, the state of Colorado sent a strong letter of support to the President of the United States and to Congress requesting that Nuevo México be incorporated into the Union to protect the civil rights of its citizens. The letter was signed by the Governor, J. A. Cooper; President of the House, H. H. Eddy; and President Pro Tem of the Senate, W. G. Smith.<sup>33</sup> However, Nuevo Mexico did not become a state until 1912.

Casimiro, as a Senator, advocated the protection of land grants in southern Colorado.<sup>34</sup> He claimed that the government was negligent in protecting Chicano lands. In addition, he felt that the government was responsible for loss of land due to its failure to enforce the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. Colorado in 1891 established a land court in order to protect against the loss of land.<sup>35</sup> But the action for most Chicanos was too late, and Chicanos in Colorado lost valuable land.

Casimiro Barela, for a span of forty years (1872-1912), was successful, at the state level, in infiltrating the political institution. During this period, Casimiro protected the rights of Chicanos in Colorado and advocated the protection of rights for Chicanos throughout the Southwest. The *Trinidad Daily News* of November 7, 1884, referred to Casimiro as the principal representative for Chicanos throughout the Southwest. In retrospect, Casimiro's accomplishments would not have been possible if political support by Chicanos had not been present. In the final analysis, Casimiro, due to his political activities, was successful in disrupting colonialism during the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

#### NOTES

1. Carlos Muñoz, "Toward a Chicano Perspective of Political Analysis," *Aztlán--Chicano Journal of the Social Sciences and*

the Arts (Fall 1970), p. 18, states that "political science is perhaps the only discipline that has almost totally ignored the Chicano."

2. Arthur F. Corwin, "Mexican American History: An Assessment," *Pacific Historical Review*, Vol. 42, 1973, p. 296.

3. The protection mechanisms were manifested by both internal (within public offices) and external (social banditry) political activities in the Southwest.

4. However, Tomás Almaguer, "Toward the Study of Chicano Colonialism," *Aztlán* (Spring 1971) states that the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo became the document of formal colonization for Chicanos in the Southwest.

5. Juan Gómez-Quinones, "Toward a Perspective on Chicano History," *Aztlán* (Fall 1971), p. 1.

6. In *Cuarenta Años de Legislador, Biografía del Senador Casimiro Barela*, José Emilio Fernández, ed. (Trinidad: NP, 1911), p. xvi.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 1.

8. *Ibid.*, p. 3.

9. Herbert Howe Bancroft, *History of California 1542-1800*, Vol. I (San Francisco: The History Co., 1886), pp. 297-743; Bancroft, *History of California, 1846-1848*, Vol. V (San Francisco: The History Co., 1886), p. 760.

10. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., p. 7.

11. *Ibid.*, pp. 3,4.

12. *Ibid.*

13. Josefa Ortiz, *Biografía de D. José Ma. Barela* (NP, 1878-1883?). The author, first wife of Casimiro, published the pamphlet on her father-in-law sometime between his death (October 10, 1878) and her death (February 7, 1883). The rare document is housed with the Colorado Historical Society, Denver.

14. Thomas B. Corbett, *The Legislative Manual of the State of Colorado* (Denver: Denver Times Publishing House and Bindery, 1877), p. 331.

15. During this period, the vast majority of the populace and voters of both Las Animas County and southern Colorado were Chicanos originally from northern Nuevo México.

16. Corbett, *Legislative Manual*, op. cit., pp. 222, 224.

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 228, 229.

18. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., p. 25.

19. Nuevo México, between 1846-1851, was neither a territory nor a state. Subsequently the only laws in operation were the laws imposed by the occupation force. Mexican laws had been abolished. Consequently, the native populace did not have laws by which to protect themselves.

20. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., pp. 4, 5.

21. Warren A. Beck, *New Mexico: A History of Four Centuries* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962), p. 136.

22. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., pp. 25, 56.

23. *Proceedings of the Constitution Convention, 1875-76* (Denver: The Smith-Brooks Press, 1907), p. 702.

24. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., p. 61.
25. *Ibid.*, p. xx.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 58.
27. *Constitutional Convention*, op. cit., p. 683.
28. Fernández, *Cuarenta Años*, op. cit., p. 92.
29. *Ibid.*
30. *Ibid.*, p. 93.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 97.
32. *Ibid.*, pp. 101, 102.
33. *Ibid.*, pp. 98, 99.
34. *Ibid.*, p. 128.
35. *Ibid.*