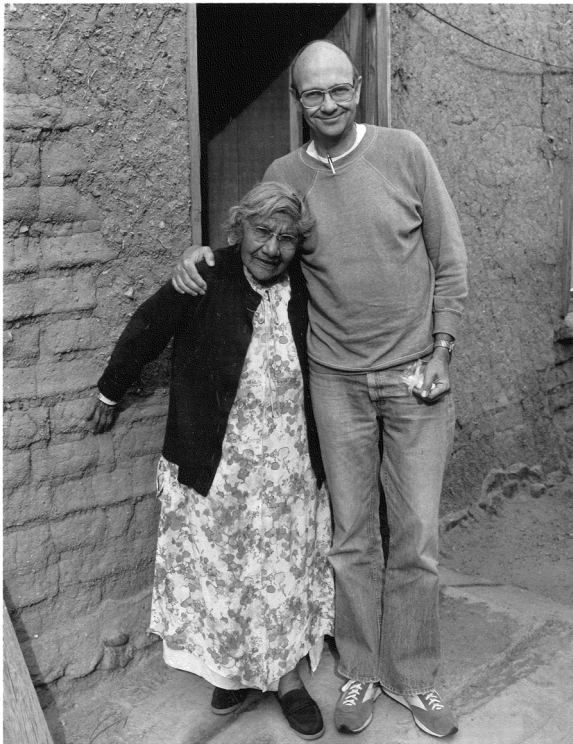


MEMORIAL

## Memorial: Bernard L. “Bunny” Fontana (1931–2016)

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Bunny Fontana with renowned O’odham potter, Laura Kerman, 1980.

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Bernard L. “Bunny” Fontana, retired University of Arizona Field Historian and esteemed editorial advisor to the *Journal of the Southwest*, died 2 April 2016, in Tucson, Arizona, at the age of 85. For those working in the regional-Southwest intellectual community, his death was akin to the burning of the classical library of Alexandria: an incredible font of wisdom and knowledge gone forever. For his colleagues at the *Journal of the Southwest* it was an epochal loss, felt daily.

Bunny (as he was universally and affectionately known) was born in Oakland, California, in 1931 and raised in Yuba City. He attended the University of California, Berkeley, graduating with a B.A. in 1953. While he was there he served as a research assistant to Robert Heizer and teaching assistant to Charles Brant. After a two-year stint in the army, Bunny began graduate work in anthropology at the University of Arizona (UA) in 1955. It was during his graduate work that he became interested in historical archaeology. With William Robinson he conducted excavations at San Xavier del Bac, south of Tucson, hoping to close the “gap” between the prehistoric and historical periods. Although they did not find the hoped-for connection, they (along with Charles Cormack and Ernest Leavitt, Jr.) produced enough data to eventually publish a book entitled *Papago Indian Pottery*, which is considered a regional classic. In the course of his graduate studies Fontana also participated in excavations at Johnny Ward’s Ranch. The still widely cited report on that project, which included technological studies of nails, tin cans, other metal, glass, and ceramics, was,

according to Ayres (1993), a “pioneering effort in that it was the first to take late nineteenth-century interchangeable parts-type artifacts and treat them seriously.”

After completing his Ph.D. in 1960, Bunny spent virtually his entire career at the University of Arizona, first working as field historian in special collections in the UA Library for two years, then hired by Emil Hauray to be the Arizona State Museum’s first ethnologist, and finally, after appointment in 1978 by President John Schaefer and Library Director David Laird, field representative in the UA Library. After more than 30 years of service, he retired in 1992 to assume the life of independent scholar, which he pursued with rigorous discipline. Some of his well-known publications include *Tarahumara: Where Night Is the Day of the Moon* (1979), *Of Earth and Little Rain: The Papago Indians* (1981), and *Entrada: The Legacy of Spain and Mexico in the United States* (1994), as well as dozens of scholarly articles, popular essays, reviews, bibliographies, and commentaries. Bunny was the recipient of many honors, including the J. C. Harrington Medal in Historical Archaeology in 1993, a lifetime-achievement award from the Southwest Literature Project of the Tucson-Pima County Library and the Arizona Historical Society in 2008, and the UA Library’s inaugural Library Legend Award in 2015. He was one of the leaders of the academic movement in the 1970s that resulted in the formation of the Southwest Center at the University of Arizona and was the guiding light of numerous organizations, such as the Southwestern Mission Research Center, the Patronato San Xavier, and the venerable century-old Tucson Literary Club, whose members were periodically educated by his erudite essays. He served as editor of the journal *Ethnohistory* from 1969 to 1972 and directed the Doris Duke American Indian Oral History Project from 1967 to 1975. He was involved in the founding of the Society for Historical Archaeology, served on its board of directors from 1967 to 1971, and was the society’s fourth president in 1970.

Beyond his many academic distinctions, awards, and recognitions, it was informally and collegially that Bunny really left his mark. I first learned that I had the job of editor of the quarterly Western journal of history, *Arizona and the West*, in the spring of 1986 while I was finishing my doctorate in political theory at Notre Dame and working as an editor at its university press. Before returning to Tucson to assume my new job, I had decided I should do a little advance editorial acquisition work

in the Midwest, since I knew my charge was to transform *Arizona and the West* into a Southwest regional-studies journal that would ultimately become the *Journal of the Southwest*. I remember going up to Ann Arbor to meet some anthropologists, and, after a cordial discussion of the state of affairs in the contemporary Southwest, they each—individually and separately—finished up by saying: “Well, when you get to Tucson, just ask Bunny!” Thereafter, this advice became the constant of intellectual life for me and for all my colleagues. Whenever students and scholars would converse about the greater Southwest or wonder about a source, place, or forgotten detail of history, someone would invariably say: “Well, let’s ask Bunny!” We did, and we always got our answer.

For a number of years, Bunny’s office was one floor below mine in the university main library. Thus, it was tempting—in those pre-E-mail days—to simply wander down to his office to ask a question or pick his brain. Bunny always greeted me with a big smile, a hearty hello, and an absolute interest in whatever was on my mind. I soon learned, however, that this was not an effective strategy to reach Bunny. Invariably, once I sat down and started to explain my business, his phone would ring. Bunny would answer (public outreach being the core of his duties as field representative), and long explanations, descriptions, and bibliographies would pour forth on every conceivable subject concerning the American Southwest and Mexican Northwest. The calls, as I recall, would come from scholars throughout the United States, from the BBC, from both amateur and professional historians, from city officials and politicians, and from librarians in search of the right reference, the correct date, or the genesis of a scholarly dispute. The lesson learned was that, if you wanted to talk to Bunny during office hours, it was best to telephone him, even if your first effort was met with a busy signal.

Beginning in 1955, Bunny lived with his talented and artistic wife, Hazel, and their children, Geoffrey, Nicholas, and Francesca, at the very edge of the San Xavier District of the Tohono O’odham Nation, on the southwestern outskirts of Tucson. The front gate of Bunny’s rambling adobe home was exactly on the demarcation line, and guests parked their cars on the tribal land in front of the house to visit. This proximity led to a life-long engagement with Tohono O’odham friends, neighbors, and colleagues. The family attended mass at the nearest Catholic church, Mission San Xavier del

Bac, thereby beginning Bunny's 60-year-long love affair with the church, its art, history, and preservation. Of Bunny's many books and articles, his crowning achievement is *A Gift of Angels: The Art of Mission San Xavier del Bac*, with photography by Edward McCain (Fontana 2010). The book is magisterial and massive, weighing well over 8 lb., with more than 350 pages of large-format text complemented by hundreds of color photographs. Both text and photographs are superb expressions of the exact detail and meaning of the church and constitute a summation of Bunny's life and passion. It is a timeless achievement and, as editor of the Southwest Center Series, it was the publishing opportunity of a lifetime for me.

Bunny loved the life of the border, whether living next door to the O'odham or traveling across the U.S.-Mexico border, leading groups from the Southwestern Mission Research Center on legendary tours of Kino missions in Sonora or documenting the riotous feast-day celebration of San Francisco in early October in Magdalena, Sonora. On the border Bunny was at home, a smile lighting his face as, with pen in hand, he acted as a faithful ethnographer, recording the day's events and their meaning. These written records sometimes found publication in journals and books, and always fueled good conversation at table or bar or just standing in the desert.

On 8 April 2016, there was a memorial service for Bunny at San Xavier. More than 300 people packed the church and doorways outside to hear the stories and eulogies, the prayers, Bunny's beloved traditional Mexican music performed by the Ronstadt family, and the blessings of a community united by interest and loss. Accolades came from around the world, including this from Ridvan Isler, Turkish master restorer who had worked on the mission: "I loved him very much. I am sure God takes care of him in a good place like his prophet" (how Bunny would have laughed merrily to hear this). Bob Vint, Bunny's devoted friend, who, as architect of the mission's restoration, had worked with Bunny for years as the exterior was reworked with a traditional lime and nopal-juice breathable plaster, had this to say:

Bunny Fontana was a gentle intellectual giant among mere mortals, and the person most responsible for the preservation of Mission San Xavier del Bac. As a founding member of the Patronato San Xavier, he quietly orchestrated from behind

the scenes the restoration of the 18th-century National Historic Landmark south of Tucson. Bunny assiduously avoided being elected president of the Patronato, serving instead for 20 years as the board secretary—from which position he made sure that what needed to be done was indeed done. He knew more than anyone about the history of the mission, about its builders and the meaning of its art. Bunny also deeply understood and appreciated the people by whom and for whom the mission was built, the Tohono O'odham of southern Arizona and northern Sonora. His books, *Of Earth and Little Rain* and *A Gift of Angels*, capture the essence of Bunny's deepest concerns: the humanity of this border region and its highest expression of faith. Bunny was possessed of a combination of wisdom and humility, and will be remembered with fondness by all who knew and treasured him for as long as we live.

By words and example, Bunny Fontana taught how to understand and express a profound sense of place. Always rigorous and never dogmatic, humble without a trace of vanity or self-promotion, Bunny was the consummate scholar and humanitarian of the multinational, multiethnic, common borderlands of the Southwest. His abiding love of the desert Southwest, of its heartland in Arizona and New Mexico, and of Sonora and Chihuahua, was rooted in deep historical and anthropological knowledge and experience. That knowledge illuminated his writing and guided an entire intellectual community. The community's loss in the face of the gathering shadows of a conflicted region is a challenge to remember Bunny's boundless good will to all and to be of good cheer, to love our place, our very ground, and to know it intimately, as we have been so well and for so long instructed.

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