

## Creative Creatures

*The ideas and the work of the American and European painters, songwriters, photographers, fiction and non-fiction authors, musicians, film makers, architects, designers, poets, and dreamers I met during my 20 years in America.*

---



### **# 34 / Dr Ben Daitz, academic, general practitioner, musician, film maker, novelist, Albuquerque / Cañones, New Mexico**

*Smithsonian Magazine* asked the rhetorical question, “Can a weekly paper in rural New Mexico raise enough hell to keep its readers hungry for more, week after week?” The *Rio Grande Sun*, published in Española, New Mexico is considered one of the top weekly newspapers in the United States. I fully agree. I was one of its most ardent readers for twelve years and couldn’t wait until the next Wednesday evening when the new edition would be out. 10,000+ others would be just as eager to pick up the paper, which is sold on every street corner—quite unique if you consider that the whole of large Rio Arriba County counts some 40,000 people, toddlers and octogenarians included. Yes, “in the age of digital media and the 24-hour news cycle, this small town newspaper causes traffic jams when it’s hawked on the street. Bob Trapp, the *Sun*’s founder, editor and publisher, is the quintessential newspaperman, the last of a vanishing breed, an honest, fearless, independent journalist and a mentor to generations of young reporters. The *Sun* is known for its investigative reporting. It broke the story that its own rural community had the highest per capita heroin overdose rate in the country. It has led the fight for open records and open meetings in a county where political shenanigans are the rule.” For Rio Arriba County is Central America rather than U.S.A.

Ben Daitz created a documentary film (see [www.newdealfilms.com](http://www.newdealfilms.com)) about this unique newspaper when in its 50<sup>th</sup> year of publication: ‘The Sun Never Sets’. The film follows the *Sun*’s reporters and editors as they write about the news, the sports, the art and culture of a large rural county. This isn’t Ben’s first documentary film; he is the man behind, amongst others, ‘Whose Home on the Range?’, which is one of the most interesting documentary films about trouble in a rural community I’ve ever watched. He is working on a documentary about Reies Tijerina, the leader of the last group that, in the 1960s, chose armed revolt to protest against the U.S. Government’s theft of their forefathers’ land, and went into hiding in the mountains when hunted by National Guard tanks. Ben and I were two of the few Anglos present when Tijerina came to his old home town, Coyote, for the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this battle.

But Ben is foremost a “medicine man.” Professor of Family and Community Medicine at UNM Albuquerque deeply involved with its Pain Consultation and Treatment Center and interested especially in muscle and soft tissue pain. He also does medical and anthropological work among the Tsimane Indians of the Bolivian Amazon, a hunter-gatherer society in transition. He is an esteemed member, with a few other doctors, of the Fiasco Brothers Bluegrass Band, where he plays the fiddle, as well as of a jazz quartet and a Balkan and Middle East ensemble. He composes music, too. He is a contributing writer for *The New York Times* on medical and community issues, such as the disastrous effects of uranium mining on the Navajo Reservation on its population. And he wrote a novel. Ben is a true Renaissance Man. He also throws great weekend-long parties in his Cañones hide-out, that mysterious canyon with its small yet unique population I wrote about before. I miss these gatherings where musicians are jamming and discussions are flowing as rapt as the beer and wine. Not that we are lacking parties and music here in Kansas...

Ben’s novel, ‘Delivery’, is a worthy read. It deals with a doctor’s dilemma in dealing with a bad situation about to get worse. It’s about the birth of a baby and how this affects a small community when the delivery goes wrong and leads to a malpractice case. “Its authentic doc talk makes it ring true,” wrote one critic. You betcha. But it doesn’t end there. The story turns on the axis of a small New Mexico town’s fortunes and failures, its history, its complex and often tragic present. The main character, the town’s general practitioner, knows the whole town intimately. His insight is used to create “a vivid mosaic of the whole community” and a portrait of contemporary rural New Mexico which has to deal with confronting Anglo and Hispanic cultures.

Confrontation was also the theme of Ben’s documentary film ‘Whose Home on the Range?’ Set in Catron County in the high desert of western New Mexico, it portrays how losing a major industry can take its toll on a community. The town is Reserve in the mid-1990s. The decades-old economic foundation of the area --large diameter logging-- crumbled when environmentalists forced a moratorium on logging in the Gila National Forest. Mill operations had to cease. Loggers, U.S. Forest Service workers, ranchers and others in related industries lost their jobs. Tensions mounted, pitting neighbor against neighbor. At one point the county made national news when commissioners passed a law requiring every household to own a gun.

The economic strain on area residents didn’t escape the county’s only doctor, Mark Unverzagt, who began to notice that many of his patients --loggers and environmentalists alike-- were suffering from stress and anxiety. Depression, substance abuse, marital strife and violence escalated among the residents of the so beautifully and peacefully situated, faraway rural town. Unverzagt called on Ben Daitz, his former professor, who became a health consultant for the county. And he called Melinda Smith at the New Mexico Center for Dispute Resolution. Together they formed the Catron County Citizens Group, an unlikely coalition of ranchers, environmentalists, former loggers and U.S. Forest Service employees and other community members, whose goal was to renew economic development in the rural area. It wasn’t easy. The group’s major achievement, at first, was to simply get the polarized factions into the same room. Once that happened, they focused mainly on building bridges and easing tension within the community. Ben made a documentary film of the conflict as well as the resolution process, which took eight years of hard work and led to what some see as a model for the future of forestry; and the film has won national and international accolades. In the end, the real victim of the whole situation and process was Mark Unverzagt, whose tireless community health work resulted in a collapsed marriage.

*Ton Haak, August 2013*