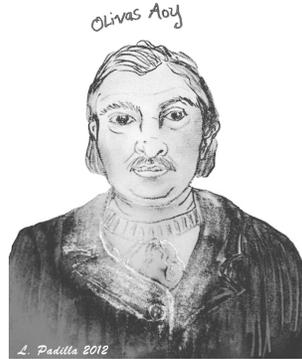


Olivas V. Aoy, The Castellar of New Mexico

by *Bill Baxter*



O.V. Aoy as imagined by Lillian Padilla, whose grandfather appears in the 1880 census at La Bonanza

On February 13, 1880, a group of eastern newspaper men made a trip from Santa Fe south to the Cerrillos mines. Among them was D.A. Millington, of the Winfield (Kansas) Courier, who wrote: “At Carbonateville we made the acquaintance of a Spaniard named Aoye, who exhibited such wide knowledge, such progressive and radical views and eloquence of expression, that we christened him ‘the Castellar of New Mexico.’ From him we derived much valuable information. He is an editor, has been the leading one of Santa Fe, and now publishes the CERRILLOS PROSPECTOR, at Carbonateville.”

Two days later, on the 15th, the Millington party had moved a couple of miles further south down the arroyo to “the Cerrillos station” where he provided what is the earliest eyewitness account of railroad tracks under construction there. A week before Millington’s visit the first railroad train had pulled into Santa Fe, and two months later (April 15) the rail line had reached the small Rio Abajo town of Albuquerque.

But this story is not about the coming of the railroad. It is rather about the life of that most uncommon and estimable of men, the Carbonateville intellectual, the Castellar (Lord of the Castle) of New Mexico, the Southwest’s unheralded secular saint, Olivas V. Aoy.

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Aoy was born in Mahon on the island of Menorca, Spain, in March 1823. Thirty years later, in 1854, he appeared in Havana, Cuba, an uncommonly well-educated Franciscan friar.

The Franciscan temperament – poverty, celibacy and service – was the constant of Aoy’s life, even if the Franciscan Order was not. Another constant for Aoy was his self-effacing nature. He sought obscurity by regularly disguising his name; Jaime Aoy Olivas Vila, Jaime Vila, Olivas

Villanueva, Olivas Villa Aoy, Olivas de La O, etc. It was said of him at the time of his death that no one was ever able to learn his real name. As well, for all that he did and for all the lives he touched, there are no known photographs or likenesses of him.

After many years in Cuba Aoy and the Franciscan Order parted ways. He left Havana for the Yucatan and lived for two years among the Maya. It is reported that he grew disillusioned with the pervasive violence and moved to New Orleans, where he was employed as a school teacher. From there he went upriver to St. Louis, where he taught at the College of the Christian Brothers.

Aoy was first documented in New Mexico in the census of July 1870, a resident of Lower Las Vegas, where he was recorded as single, a 44 year-old school teacher. (He was 47.)

A year later (July 1, 1871) the Santa Fe Daily New Mexican had this item: “The Advertiser, a new paper published at Las Vegas by Mr. Aoy, has come to hand. It is published in English and Spanish, and supports Mr. [Jose Manuel] Gallegos for delegate.” [Gallegos won.]

The Spanish edition of Aoy’s Las Vegas newspaper was titled *el Anunciador*.

In the August 25, 1871 Advertiser Aoy editorialized, expressing some very progressive, un-Franciscan views: “From the present National idea of non-sectarian Schools, has to spring forth, the future Holy Infallible Church, of the Great Occidental Republic, whose Creed will be ‘Science’s Intuitive Axioms,’ with demonstrative Knowledge instead of blind Belief and the genuine Prayer of Deeds, instead that, a meaningless Talk.”

The teachings of the public schools and the Catholic Church in America were destined be based on knowledge rather than beliefs, on deeds rather than talk.

Four years later the New Mexican said of Aoy: “It is with pleasure that we acknowledge a pleasant call from Mr. Aoy, and with still greater pleasure that we can record him among the fearless outspoken progressive editors of New Mexico. He has a bonafide interest in the substantial development of our material resources; in the wiping out of ancient prejudices passions and bigotries, the learning of the masses of our –people their right as duties as freemen and their general elevation in the scale of American progress and civilization. There is need of a few more publishers of newspapers in New Mexico, who are imbued with that same generous spirit of onward and upward development – backed by the same unselfish, fearless, outspoken spirit in driving home the truth that characterizes the efforts of Mr. Aoy.” [SF Daily New Mexcian June 4, 1875]

For eight years Aoy served as a publisher, a school teacher and a Spanish language tutor in Las Vegas. Then, just as the tracks of the new railroad approached Las Vegas, as if to stay ahead of

them, he transferred the Advertiser to other Las Vegans, who renamed it *La Independencia*, and he moved to Santa Fe, if only momentarily.

By June 4 1879 Aoy had established himself at Carbonateville, the main camp in the booming Cerrillos Hills mining region two dozen miles south-southwest of Santa Fe. There he began the first newspaper in the region; the Cerrillos Prospector. He remained in Carbonateville for a full year, turning out the weekly Prospector. For a brief period it was a daily. No copies of the Cerrillos Prospector newspaper are known to have survived.

Carbonateville, July 1879: “The little camp of seventy or eighty souls [a multiple of that number of people were scattered throughout the nearby diggings] boasted of a weekly newspaper commensurate in size – two sheets about twelve inches square – carried on by a picturesque editor, who was called Padre Aoy. He was a dark-skinned little man of nervous manner and voluble speech who was generally referred to by the Mexicans as a *gachupín* – that is to say, in English, of Spanish birth. Because of a camp tradition that he had been formerly a priest, he was commonly called ‘Padre’. Now the Padre made a scanty living by camp subscriptions and by advertisements, the latter coming largely from Santa Fe business houses” [Pioneer Surveyor – Frontier Lawyer. The Personal Narrative of O.W. Williams]

On July 10, 1879 Aoy became the first and last postmaster of Carbonateville, and on April 5, 1880 he became the first postmaster of Turquesa, New Mexico. This was a technical distinction as the only thing that changed was the name on the postmark. Carbonateville, for postal purposes, had become Turquesa. After almost a year as postmaster, on June 22, Aoy was succeeded by Samuel W. Bonner.

Aoy was a local character at Carbonateville, and a popular one. He had neither skills nor interest in mines or mining, but was included, presumably by friends, as one of the “discoverers” and owners of the Mollie F. lode claim, on the north side of the Cerrillos Hills in the Gonzales Mining District.[April 2, 1880, Locations & Mining Deeds B#15406 p.425] Including him in their enterprise was apparently a gesture of affection, as there is no evidence that Aoy ever worked the claim nor that the Mollie F ever produced anything of value.

For the 1880 census Aoy served as the enumerator for District 42, counting people from La Cienega in the north to the brand new Cerrillos railroad station in the south. His domain included Pino’s Ranch, Roger’s Bend, Delgado’s Ranch, Bonanza City, Hungry Gulch, Purdin’s Camp, Carbonateville, Poverty Hollow and Poverty Flats. On his census sheets the clarity of his handwriting and his organization and attention to detail are offset somewhat by the number of miners he is known to have missed. Traveling from camp to camp during the first twenty days of June 1880, he recorded probably between half and two-thirds (by comparison with other records) of the area’s dispersed population.

The census entry for himself, done on June 8, lists him as 54 (actually 57, but 54 is consistent with the age he gave in the 1870 census), single, and that both he and his parents were born in Spain.

The sketch of Aoy [Historical Sketch of Aoy School, B.A. Schaer, El Paso Public Schools, 1951], written a half-century after his death, has him moving in mid-1880 the short distance down the arroyo to Cerrillos Station, taking his newspaper operation with him. But an item in the New Mexican over two years after that date [Oct. 24, 1882] promised that “Cerrillos Station will soon have a weekly newspaper.” Cerrillos had no newspaper. That clue, coupled with Aoy as publisher of the weekly WALLACE WATCHMAN, which was published from May 1880 to October 1882 [New Mexico Newspapers, UNM Press 1975], indicates that from Carbonateville Aoy moved directly to Wallace. Since his census and postmaster responsibilities required his presence at Carbonateville through June 22, 1880, for a couple of months he probably had a foot in both places. Wallace and Carbonateville, by train and a short hike, were about two hours apart.

We have no contemporaneous references suggesting Aoy was ever a resident of Cerrillos Station.

Wallace – later renamed Thornton, and today known as Domingo or Kewa Station – had been a small railroad camp, the accumulation center for railroad ties cut in the Jemez Mountains and floated down the Rio Grande to the Cochiti boom. But in mid-1882 Wallace replaced Lamy as the Division Point for the AT&SF, the layover station for train crews who had time to kill and money in their pockets. That mix attracted a rough bunch. The wildness of the town – its new mayor was an unabashed bunko man – may have contributed to Aoy’s growing dissatisfaction with the place. His last issue of the Wallace Watchman came out in October 1882.

By November 1882 Aoy was in Guaymas, the Mexican port on the Gulf of California. Guaymas was the then-purported Pacific Ocean terminus of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe system, as the Southern Pacific Railroad had already preempted the good ports in southern California. In Guaymas he came under the influence of Mormon missionaries, and by early 1883 Aoy had become a member of that Church and was living in Salt Lake City.

Information regarding his four years in Salt Lake City is contradictory. The evidence points to Aoy (or Oay, as his name is sometimes written), along with Meliton G. Trejo, Daniel W. Jones and James Z. Stewart, translating the Book of Mormon into Spanish. One version of this story has Aoy’s classical, polished Spanish being represented by the Church as a direct communication of the Holy Writ rather than an especially competent translation, contrary to Aoy’s sense of what was proper. In another version it was Aoy’s tendency to speak out about what he saw as inconsistencies and unscientific preachments of the Church that caused his falling-out. Whatever the cause, Aoy grew disillusioned with yet another, as he probably saw it, doctrinaire and dogmatic church.

Even though he and the LDS Church parted ways, in a eulogy given at the time of his death by an LDS Church elder the former Franciscan was characterized as “a member of the Church and died so.”

Aoy is credited by the LDS Church today as having had a small role in the translation of the Book of Mormon into Spanish.

From Salt Lake City Aoy returned to Santa Fe, and from there to Silver City for a few months, where his Spanish-language newspaper was not a success.

Olivas V. Aoy’s wanderings finally came to an end in mid-1887 in El Paso. There, as the story goes, planning to go on into Mexico but having to wait in El Paso for his baggage, he discovered the plight of the children of that town, and knew instantly what he needed to do. He spent the last eight years of his life to giving the many Spanish-speaking children of El Paso instruction in English that they might succeed in the town’s English-language school system.

The Aoy School of El Paso began in a rented room behind an assay office on San Francisco Street, which Aoy furnished and supplied using money he had earned in Salt Lake City. When his savings ran out Aoy began a night school for adults wishing to learn Spanish, and he used the income earned from the night school to fund his day school.

Starting in January 1888 the local school board began to support Aoy’s Mexican Preparatory School, paying the rent of \$15 per month and providing him with a salary of \$35 a month. An article written by a former student some years later says that Aoy lived on \$7 of the \$35 and put the remainder back into his school.

Construction of a new brick schoolhouse was announced, but Aoy never lived to see it. He died before construction began, at age 73, on April 27 1895. The new campus was completed in 1899 and was named in his honor the Aoy School.

The Aoy School marked its 125th year on June 6, 2012, the oldest continuously operated school in the El Paso area. The present Aoy School is located on Seventh and Kansas streets, El Paso, Texas.

Altogether a pretty remarkable legacy for a one-time census taker from Carbonateville.