Book offers view into local history

Three Roads to Magdalena: Coming of Age in a Southwest Borderland, 1890-1990 by David Wallace Adams. University Press of Kansas. Hardback $34.95. eBook version from eBook retailers. 454 pages.

By Nancy Coggeshall

David Wallace Adams arrived in Magdalena in 1981 to serve as the curriculum director at Alamo Navajo Reservation School, then two years old. Curious about the area, he sought local histories.

All he found was Agnes Morley Cleveland's No Life for a Lady. But that regional classic in no way explored the complexities of the region's ethno-cultural landscape, populated by Anglos, Hispanics and Alamo Navajos. Determined to fill that gap, he purchased a tape recorder and began interviewing.

"Someday you will get all the stories," Candelaria Garcia told him. Adams' research yielded 3000 pages of transcribed interviews. His Three Roads to Magdalena, Coming of Age in a Southwest Borderland, 1890-1990 is now available. The oral history interviews are the crux of this important book. It comprehensively reviews Magdalena's history, conflicts and accommodation as the town has wrestled with tri-culturalism during ever-changing times.

Magdalena became "a town of families…a town full of children" in its growth and development from conquest to the importance of mining, ranching, homesteading—and the all-important railroad spur from Socorro. Adams uses the term "borderland" to pinpoint the "border crossings" where Hispanic, Anglo and Alamo Navajo meet children of other ethnicities as they come of age. These points

of contact contribute to "reinforcing long-standing boundaries and forging intergroup connection of the deepest kind" he says.

In Magdalena school was common ground.

In the mid-1930s "a child born in Socorro County would have less than a 50 per cent chance of surviving to the age of one year."

This was one of the state's highest rates, three and a half times higher than the national average, due to ranches' remote locations, doctors' fees for mileage and women's traditional role in childbirth.

Children arrived at the school from Anglo "detached nuclear families," Hispanic families' wider network and Alamo Navajos families that emphasize the maternal line.

Memories of childhood include a rancher's son who recalled his mother pushing a heard of wild horses down a river bed. Candelaria Garcia remembered the time when her mother beat the men in a horse race.

An Alamo Navajo boy recalled the burning of the family's hogan upon his mother's death.

In Magdalena economic status was eminently apparent.

The children of wealthy Anglo families might have a library in their home.

They might take music lessons, attend prep schools or study abroad. Well-to-do Hispanic families might have domestic help and discuss "the price of zinc, European politics, and the boxer Jack Dempsey."

In the 1920s and 1930s Anglos were ranked in the higher-income categories while Hispanics were "over-represented in the labor and service sectors." During the Depression dry land homesteaders in Pie Town fared as meanly as Hispanics.

Alamo Navajos suffered the most of all.

One Alamo Navajo wondered how he had survived a childhood of herding sheep without shoes and a daily diet of just two tortillas.

Housed in dormitories built by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Alamo Navajo students started attending school in Magdalena in 1959. The introduction of these students into the school system was "arguably the most important development" in all three ethnic groups in the post-World War II-era.

Besides being homesick, the biggest barrier looming for Alamo Navajo children—as for Hispanic children previously—was language. This prompted derision on the part of English-speakers and resulted in humiliation and low self-esteem for the new comers.

Non-English speaking-students didn't know that permission was required to go to the lavatory nor how to ask to be excused.

"But ever so slowly increasing numbers of students reached across the gulf of difference." That culminated in 1968 in Magdalena's high school basketball team, the Steers. An African-American and Anglo, Hispanic and Alamo Navajo players enjoyed a winning streak of twenty-nine wins and no losses, taking them to state finals and the pages of national newspapers. Sport and adolescence had converged to move the town toward a greater sense of community.

A failed shot with three seconds left in the qualifying game dashed hope for the state championship. A photographer captured what became a universal image of loss.

Depicted were starting guards Ray Martinez and Ramón Guttiérez, both kneeling, as cheerleader Barbara Julian stands with her hand over her mouth.

Wire services circulated the picture globally, bringing more fame to the team than victory.

Adams addresses a swirl of issues involving intergroup contact, the influence of institutions on identity, shifting power bases and the role of children in an area where ethnicity is so clearly defined.

The stories he collected and catalogued illustrate his aims while providing readers with glimpses of the past—and perhaps a better understanding of others.

Nancy Coggeshall is the author of Gila Country Legend: The Life and Times of Quentin Hulse