

The gospel truth: The story behind San Mateo's name origin takes a trip to South America

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. — Editor's note: The Journal continues "What's in a Name?," a twice a month column in which staff writer Elaine Briseño will give a short history of how places in New Mexico got their names.

The tale of San Mateo Boulevard includes a woman, a saint, some telephone lines in a foreign country and the desire to grow up.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?



Elaine Briseño

San Mateo is the Spanish translation of St. Matthew, who was one of the 12 disciples of Jesus and the author of the Gospel of St. Matthew, which is the first book in the New Testament.



Two women pose for a First National Bank promotion in the 1960s. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

According to Robert Julyan's "The Place Names of New Mexico," 16 places in New Mexico feature the name San Mateo, one of which is a small village in Cibola County. The population there in 2010 was 161. The town was named after the nearby small mountain range of the same name.

San Mateo Boulevard was one of many new roads established in the Albuquerque during the 1940s and '50s. It was a time when Albuquerque went from a town to a mature, robust city. Albuquerque residents, like many across the country, voraciously embraced life after suffering the hard years of The Great Depression. Developing cities into modern metropolises with paved roads, rows of houses and commercial endeavors was a symbol of wealth and prosperity post-World War II.

Albuquerque Mayor Clyde Tingley was at the forefront of the movement here in the 1940s and 1950s, and he had plenty of like-minded developers offering their support. The Albuquerque Heights were birthed during this time, with new subdivisions creeping over once empty fields, blanketing the area with tract houses.

Before this time, Albuquerque residents were clustered Downtown, in Old Town, near the University of New Mexico and scattered on homesteads along the river. Maps of the city from the late 1930s show absolutely no development in “East Mesa,” which is now the Heights, and there was no road named San Mateo. The road appeared in 1948 in newspaper advertisements. One talked about “Valuable lots near new High School off San Mateo” for sale. It does not indicate which high school that was but it was possibly Highland High School, which opened in 1949.

The street, however, was not just named to honor the well-known saint.



The First National Bank building at Central and San Mateo in 1963. The top two floors were an exclusive club. The bottom two floors were used for bank operations and open to the public. (Journal Archives)

According to Judy Nickell in her book “Atrisco to Zena Lona,” the area between San Mateo and San Pedro, between Zuni and Lomas, was subdivided by Mary Fox. It is Fox who gave the street its name.

Fox’s travels to South America with her husband, Marion L. Fox, provided the inspiration for the names. Mr. Fox was involved in installing telephone lines in South America. Many of the streets in the subdivision, including San Mateo, were named for Venezuelan towns the couple visited while there.



A cyclist moves along San Mateo Boulevard at Central Avenue. San Mateo was named by Mary Fox, the woman who developed the area near that intersection. (Greg Sorber/Albuquerque Journal)

Another interesting fact – but not necessarily related to street-naming in Albuquerque – is that Marion L. Fox was the editor of the Albuquerque Journal from 1912 to 1920. He was also responsible for helping to establish the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District. He died in 1942.

The Foxes married in 1906, but Mary was already blazing trails, doing work that was mostly left to men in the early 1900s. According to her Sept. 26, 1961, Albuquerque Journal obituary, Fox was “successful as a pioneer woman operator in the oil fields of Kentucky. Even earlier she was active in numerous business ventures in the eastern part of the United States and in Latin American countries ...”

It gives her credit for being one of the first people to anticipate development of the city’s then empty east mesa. She formed a development company in 1923 in preparation of the growth and remained president until she died. The obit also notes that she was “actively interested” in several major projects either completed or in the works at the time of her death, including Coronado and the iconic 17-story First National Bank building at San Mateo and Central. Mary Fox also has a park named after her in Downtown Albuquerque. She donated land for another park nearby and named it Marion L. Fox Memorial Park in honor of her husband.

Mary Fox died on Sept. 25, 1961, of a heart attack and is buried at Sunset Memorial Park in Albuquerque.

Unfortunately, there isn’t much more public information about her life. It’s only in the recent past that newspapers and even historians began to take note of women’s accomplishments and contributions. Women weren’t even given their own identity at one time. Publications identified them by their husbands’ name and slapped a Mrs. in front of it.

The population in Albuquerque nearly tripled from 1940 to 1950, going from 35,449 residents to 97,012 according to the U.S. Census Bureau. Jumping again in the 1960 census to 201,189.

Mary Fox, no doubt, contributed to the city’s mid-century population boom.