

Bill Baxter, 1943-2015: History buff helped protect Cerrillos Hills and then kept its mining tales alive

By Phaedra Haywood

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Bill Baxter loved New Mexico and devoted years of his life to studying and preserving the Galisteo Basin and Cerrillos Hills. He died last month after a long illness but leaves behind a legacy of volunteerism and a body of historical research that will help future generations learn about New Mexico's past.

Baxter was born in 1943 and grew up working at his family's Chevron station in Pismo Beach, Calif. He first visited New Mexico in the 1950s as a Boy Scout.

After earning a degree in anthropology from the University of California, Berkeley, he served in the Army in Vietnam, worked in Liberia and Ethiopia with the Peace Corps and installed computer systems in San Francisco for several decades. In 1997, he and his wife moved to New Mexico.

In Santa Fe, Baxter was a docent, lecturer, writer and community activist who advocated for the public acquisition of a number of important historical sites in Santa Fe County, including the Chalchihuitl, a former turquoise mine, and the land that became Cerrillos Hills State Park.

He also wrote several books about the history of the area, including *The Gold of the Ortiz Mountains: A Story of New Mexico and The West's First Major Gold Rush*, published by Lone Butte Press in 2004, in which his fascination for his subject matter is plain.

"The history of New Mexico mining and of the Ortiz Mountains is a tale of human greed and survival," he wrote, "of politics and



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Bill Baxter of San Marcos, shown near Ambush Rock in Cerrillos in 2012, was a history buff who volunteered with Cerrillos Hills State Park and the Ortiz Mountains Educational Preserve. Luis Sanchez Saturno/New Mexican file photo

murder, of dreamers and those who live off them. But it's mostly a tale of lust for that soft and nearly useless metal that has so regularly tested the mettle of mankind.”

He served on the county's Open Lands, Trails and Parks Advisory Committee and created a 14,000-page public database of information about the history of Cerrillos, which he compiled by talking to people and painstakingly poring over more than 100 years of newspaper articles. The database has a permanent home at www.cerrillosnewmexico.com and allows people to search for ancestors who lived in the area by name.

The *Santa Fe New Mexican* named Baxter one of its 10 Who Made a Difference in 2012.

“He was incredibly modest and very funny,” said Sarah Wood, a manager at Cerrillos Hills State Park, which Baxter helped create and where he often volunteered to give guided history hikes and lectures.

“He would do programs for us all the time, and he never wanted any credit, he never wanted any recognition, he just wanted to do it,” said Woods, who said she sometimes billed him as “the man who knows too much,” a moniker that once attracted a visitor to come all the way from California just to take one of his tours.

“Generous” and “warm” were words that more than one person used to describe Baxter, a man with twinkly blue eyes and a bushy white beard.

“He was very helpful to me, and he's always been totally ready to share whatever information he had,” said writer, activist and art critic Lucy Lippard, one of Baxter's friends and neighbors who worked with him on protection efforts in the Galisteo Basin. “He was always ready to step in and do whatever needed to be done for all the causes we were involved in.”

“He was a really kind of unusual, highly intelligent person,” said Ardeth Baxter, his wife and companion of 44 years. “A lot of people think he was some kind of saint, a nose-to-the-grindstone workaholic type, but he liked what he did. He just picked things he liked to do, and people he liked to be with, and he was happy. It wasn't like he was being some kind of martyr.”

Ardeth Baxter said her husband didn't want a funeral or memorial service — though close friends might be plotting something despite this request — and asked that people who wish to honor him do some community volunteer work in his memory instead.

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