

INTRODUCTION TO NEW MEXICO PORTFOLIO

I met William Clift for the first time when he came to see me five years ago in Santa Fe, and brought with him a portfolio of photographs of Boston's Old City Hall. He had been commissioned to photograph this Victorian landmark of an era gone by as part of an effort to save it from demolition. I was instantly impressed by his perceptive attention to architectural details, which he had skillfully used to produce a document of great beauty and persuasive force. The photographs I saw of bare rooms, unlighted corridors, curving balustrades, attic windows, cornices and facades evoked a tingling expectation that by looking more closely I would see forgotten occupants of those dim offices flicker before my eyes; that by listening attentively I would hear the faint echoes of footsteps still reverberating down empty halls and stairways. Is it conceivable that William Clift, who can arouse such nostalgia in another, did not himself experience similar sensations as he wandered through the vacant haunted building? Such convincing rendering of emotions in pictorial form ~~as~~ ^{Clift} ~~Clift has done here~~ is the ultimate of artistic achievement. These are the most revealing architectural photographs I have ever seen. And Old City Hall still stands.

William Clift recently applied his considerable talents to the New Mexico scene with the same consummate skill he displayed in the Boston project. This portfolio epitomizes his latest work. Though the theme is vastly different from

his Boston project, Clift demonstrates that subject matter is not an important factor in high aesthetic accomplishment, which after all is primarily a function of one's insights and visions. It is reasonable to suppose that he was immediately drawn emotionally to this arid landscape and set about to translate his feelings into a photographic record. Clift was not repelled by the austerity and harsh impersonality of the New Mexico countryside. Instead he saw the pinion-juniper flats and low gravelly hills of the Rio Grande valley as a background to man's commitment to the land, a commitment manifest in his adobe dwellings and in his cultivation, vulnerable though it is to the vagaries of climate. He sensed a poignancy in these aspects of human endeavor to wrest subsistence from an unwilling land.

Wide vistas and unyielding sparseness combine in this high plateau country to produce an impression of persistence, of endurance, yet the contrary evidence of dramatic atmospheric displays, of storm and flood, spreads an aura of mutability over the landscape. This conflict between opposite effects creates the illusion of mystery of which William Clift, with an acumen that springs from inner wells of perception, takes advantage. He grasps the fleeting moment to capture the inherent inscrutability of nature.