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Academic pathway: Spain Road pays homage to formidable educator who led UNM, APS

By Elaine D. Briseño / For the Journal

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The Albuquerque Journal announced Charles R. Spain's hiring in the March 3, 1954, edition of the paper.
Newspaper Archives

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

Driving along Spain Road in the Northeast Heights, some might assume the thoroughfare is named for one of the countries that helped shape our state.

Good educated guess, but it would be incorrect. The road is actually named for Charles R. Spain, a formidable educator who helped steer the ship at both the University of New Mexico and Albuquerque Public Schools.

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Looking west on Spain Road by Eubank Boulevard NE. The road was named after educator Charles R. Spain.

Jon Austria/Journal



Spain Road in Albuquerque was named after educator Charles R. Spain.

Jon Austria/Journal



The intersection of Spain Road and Revi Don Drive. Spain Road was named after educator Charles R. Spain.

Jon Austria/Journ

Spain was appointed dean of the UNM's College of Education in March 1954. He arrived in New Mexico with his wife Virginia and their two children to take up the mantle relinquished by S.P. Nanninga, who held the position for nearly 30 years. He was president of Morehead Teachers College, which is now Morehead State University, in Kentucky when UNM lured him away

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He had cultivated his expertise as an educator in many states before landing here. He earned his undergraduate degree from Bethel College in Kansas and started his career as a teacher and then principal in 1932 within Tennessee's Carroll County Schools system. He would follow that with administrator positions in Arkansas and a doctorate from Columbia University's teacher's college in 1941.

He continued building his career as administrator in Kentucky, also serving as a lieutenant in the Naval Reserve from 1944 to 1946, before being named president at Morehead in 1951.

However, Spain would only hold his administrator post at UNM for a brief time.

In May of 1955, he was appointed superintendent of Albuquerque Public Schools, earning \$27,500 per year – the highest base salary of any public official at the time, according to this obituary. He replaced longtime superintendent John Milne, who was set to retire the following year after holding the position for 45 years and ushering the district into the modern era.

Spain had not sought out the position but was instead approached by the board about possibly being a successor to Milne.

Then university president Tom Popejoy said he was reluctant to see Spain leave UNM and knew the decision had been a difficult one for him.

During Spain's tenure, the district grew from about 40,000 to 72,500 students. He spent much of his time as superintendent campaigning for increased state and federal funding for education. He served as president of the city's Kiwanis Club and served on the board of directors for the Bataan Hospital.



Charles R. Spain with his wife Virginia and two children in the President's House at Morehead State University in 1951 when he was president. The couple would go on to have another boy after moving to Albuquerque.

Despite the serious manner in which he approached his job, Spain, a native of Cedar Grove, Tennessee, seems to have taken other things more lightly. That became apparent in 1955, when he was forced to prove he was not dead.

“The new dean of the College of Education at the University of New Mexico is having a hard time staying out of the obituary columns of the newspapers,” a Feb. 9, 1955, story in the Albuquerque Journal said. “Dr. Charles R. Spain would like to assure his friends and relatives that he is in perfect health, but beginning to breathe uneasily after two reports of his demise.”

The most recent report, it appears, came when the Associated Press in Louisville, Kentucky, sent an inquiry wanting to know if Spain “had been stricken fatally.” An AP reporter in New Mexico called Spain’s home directly to find out how and when the new dean died.

Here’s how the conversation unfolded:

Reporter: “Is this the late Dr. Charles R.

Spain?”

Spain: “Well, this is Charley Spain, all right.”

Stop seeing this ad Why this ad?

Reporter: “Then you’re not dead as the AP dispatch a moment ago indicated to

me?” Spain: “Never felt better in my life. Who said I was dead?”

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Reporter: “Never mind now. Please hang up and let me scotch this reporter of AP before it hits every paper in New Mexico, Kentucky and Tennessee.”

Three months earlier, a radio report had gone out that the former president of Morehead Teachers College had passed away. The man happened to share a last name that sounded similar to Spain and more than a dozen friends phoned to find out about funeral arrangements.

Spain and the reporter went out for coffee afterwards to celebrate Spain’s not deaths.

BloomChic

Sadly, reports of his death just a decade later in May of 1965 were not false. He died of a heart attack at the age of 51 in his own kitchen with his wife present. He had woken up about 4 a.m. telling his wife he felt peculiar. The two went into the kitchen, where he drank Alka-Seltzer. He then complained of a numbness and a “funny feeling” in his abdomen before collapsing to the floor.

He was revered by state leaders, including his former boss Popejoy, who said his death was a “great loss to the field of education.”

New Mexico Gov. Jack M. Campbell told the Journal after Spain’s death that he was respected not only for his achievements, but for the thoughtful way in which he accomplished those achievements.

“The name Charles Spain has become synonymous with all that is the best in public education and all that we hope to accomplish in public education in New Mexico,” Campbell said.

It’s clear his impact was remembered for years after his death.

The day of his funeral, the public schools closed after lunch so students and faculty could attend his services, and four board members served as his pallbearers.

Knight Road NE turns into Spain Road as it bends east and continues on past Tramway Boulevard into the Foothills of Albuquerque. It's not clear when the road was named for him, but it did not exist until well past his death, as the city had not spread that far east yet.

The APS board voted in January of 1976 to name its new Career Enrichment Center after Spain.