Welcome to Centennial Journeys: Tales from Along the Road to Statehood and Beyond, a commemoration of New Mexico’s 2012 Centennial. I’m your host Claude Stephenson.

The three of them were coming back from a largely wasted day in the Chama Valley on October 31st, 1941. The photographer had found nothing that was worth shooting. And now the sun was going down. Driving dejectedly down Hwy 84 toward Espanola, the moon was rising early over the Sangre de Cristos. Then the whole world lit up. Off to his left, the little town of Hernandez was awash in light, it’s church and cemetery crosses glowing like farolitos. He nearly drove the car into the ditch in stopping. He grabbed his 8x10 camera as his assistant, Cedric Wright, set up the tripod. But his light meter was missing. He sent his son Michael to find it; but Michael came back empty-handed. Desperate to capture the image in the fast-fading light, he made a split-second decision, put a filter over the lens, calculated the candlepower of the moonlight, set the F-stop and exposure, composed the picture and snapped the shot. He pulled out the slide and jammed it back in for another shot with a more open lens; but the light was gone. The town was dark. Just like that.

When he got home and developed the negative, he found that he had underexposed the shot. If only he had been able to get off that second one. He printed it anyway.

Although the foreground was dimmed and the sky darkened, the church and cemetery and the clouds and moon behind them were sharp and clear. It looked like it had been taken at night. When he published it, Ansel Adams became world famous, and the picture is considered by many to be the most perfect photograph ever taken. Moonrise, Hernandez, New Mexico.

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