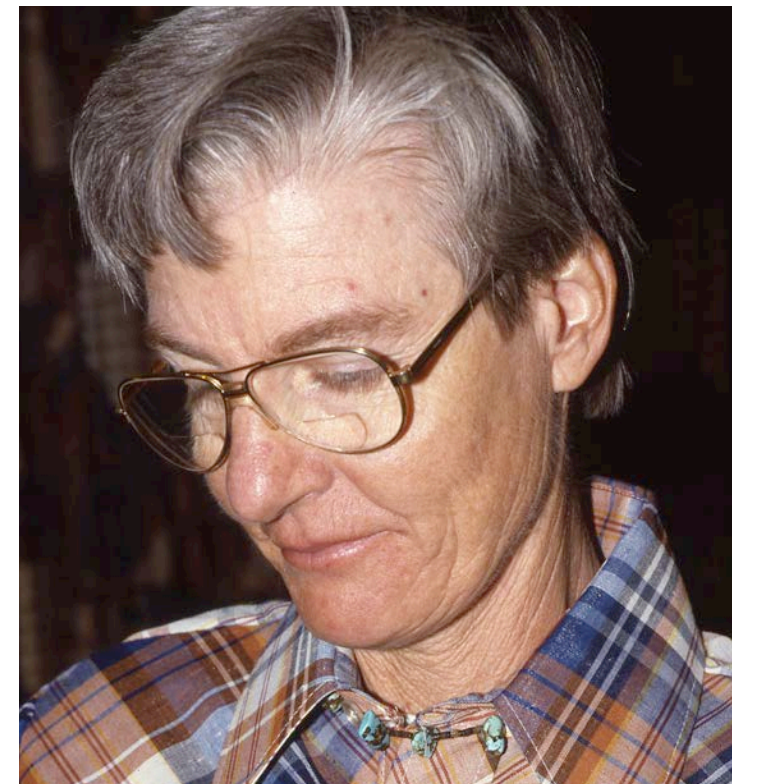


Jessie Fitzgerald

America's first female County Agricultural Extension Agent

Jessie Fenton Fitzgerald (b. 1930, Albuquerque, NM–d. 2013, Albuquerque, NM) grew up on her parents' remote homestead in New Mexico's Jemez Mountains. Everyone in the family, including the children, was expected to do many daily chores on the ranch. Education was a high priority, but the family lived far from a public school, so the children were home-schooled. Their grandfather, Reverend E .M. Fenton, founder of the area's only Presbyterian church, also homesteaded in the rugged but beautiful Jemez mountains. Fenton Mountain, Fenton Lake and Fenton Valley along the Cebolla River Canyon are named after Jessie's family.



Jessie never stopped reaching for her dream, even when others said it was impossible. In 1970 she broke a gender stereotype to become the first female county agricultural Extension agent in the United States.

Jessie finished her high school education at Menaul School in Albuquerque, where she realized her home schooling was more than adequate. In 1950 she married R.W. Fitzgerald, and for eight summers both Jessie and her husband worked as cowboys: first on the Valles Caldera, a landscape of grassy valleys in a spectacular volcanic depression, then on a ranch in Cebolla, NM. A photograph of R. W. "Dick" Fitzgerald working cattle on the Valle Caldera appears on an iconic Stetson hat box still in use today. However, the couple struggled.



A photograph of R.W. "Dick" Fitzgerald on the Valle Caldera, by photographer Harvey Caplin, appears on an iconic Stetson hat box

Jessie decided to strike out on her own with her two sons. She moved into an old dugout in Española and looked for a job. Although she was a highly skilled ranch hand, area ranchers seemed unwilling to hire a woman. She got a similar response at the feed store.

At the time, Jessie was managing a 4-H club for kids in Jemez Springs and the Jemez Mountains. (Jessie later wrote that this

club produced seven Extension agents and a veterinarian, all NMSU graduates). She also worked with county Extension agent Jim Sais, building the 4-H program across the county. But without a job, she told Jim she couldn't continue her volunteer work. So when Jim offered her summer work as an aide with NMSU's Rio Arriba County Extension program, she jumped at the chance.

Jessie had previously completed a year of college at UNM, and Jim told her if only she could complete a bachelor's degree, she might find a future in agricultural research or teaching. But Jessie said her dream was to become a county agricultural Extension agent.

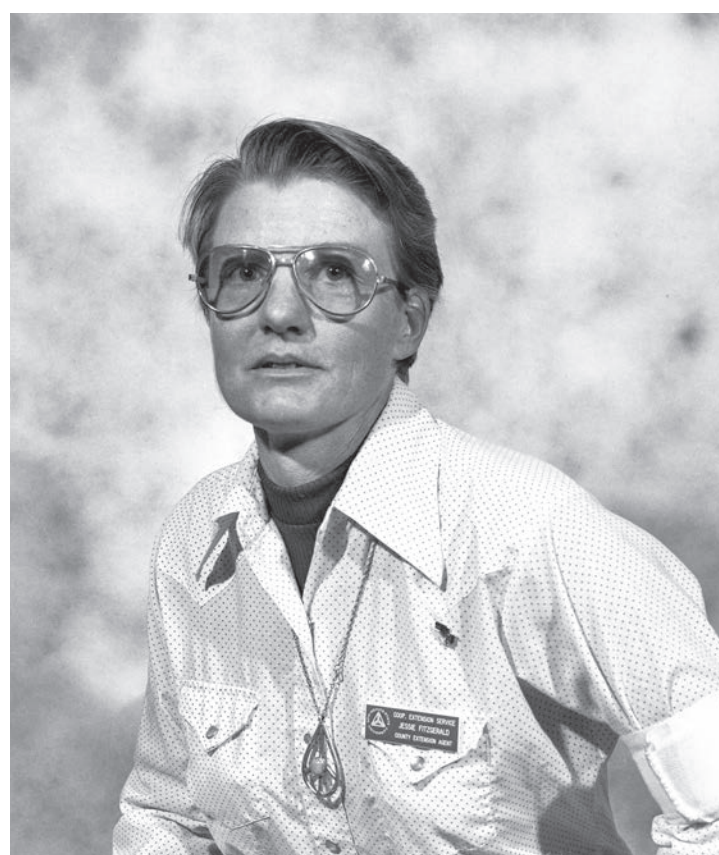
Jim initially told Jessie her dream was impossible. He knew there had never been a woman county agricultural agent hired in the United States and didn't want to encourage unrealistic expectations.

But that summer, when Jessie helped chaperone 4-Hers at State 4-H Conference on the NMSU campus, Jim arranged for her to meet NMSU Assistant Dean of Agriculture, Josh Enzie. Dean Enzie looked straight at Jessie and asked, "And just why can't she become a county agricultural agent?" Jim remembers that Jessie immediately came to life, moving across the room to sit next to the dean, where

together they laid out a plan for Jessie to finish her degree and follow her dream.

Immediately after earning her NMSU bachelor's degree in Agricultural and Extension Education in 1970, Jessie became America's first female county agricultural Extension agent, working first in Valencia County, then in Cibola County. In 1980, she earned a master's degree from the University of Maryland.

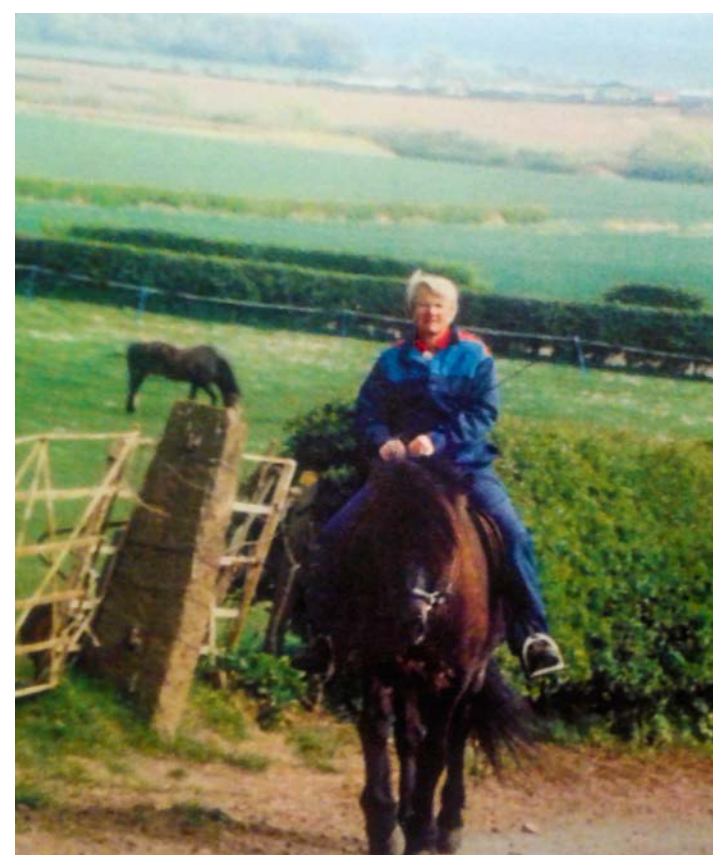
Jessie was an accomplished horsewoman. During summer breaks from college, she worked at Ghost Ranch in Abiquiu, NM as a dude wrangler and also as a volunteer on week-long high country wilderness rides. She helped many aspiring equestrians, both young and old, gain confidence with horses and learn to embrace the joys of riding on various terrain. She was dedicated to others' well-being, initiating many community improvements projects. She had an amazing knowledge of native plants and flowers. She loved singing, playing guitar, fiddle and banjo, wood carving, telling yarns (as she called her stories), and exercising her dry wit. She is remembered fondly around New Mexico by beloved friends and family, including her long time partner, Peggy Kielman, and by her son Dan, grandson Jonathen Peña and her colleagues in Extension and the College of ACES.



Jessie Fitzgerald in an NMSU employee photo.



At cow camp with the chuckwagon.



Jessie was known for her horsemanship skills.



With her son, the late George Fitzgerald.