



Historic Waterways Keep Traditions Alive.

Perhaps nowhere in the United States is the distant past as evident as in northern New Mexico Northern. In towns and villages throughout the region, the thread of tradition runs strong, creating bonds between people and the land of their ancestors, their culture, and their traditions. Once a remote outpost of the Spanish empire, this area of New Mexico has preserved a connection to the land and a reverence for the earth and what it provides to sustain life, both material and spiritual.

Centuries ago, Spanish colonists took advantage of the abundant snow melt from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains Sangre de Cristo Mountains above Taos and dug an elaborate network of irrigation. The Islamic invasion of Spain in the late eighth century brought this highly efficient irrigation system to Spanish towns and villages. In the sixteenth century, the colonists brought it to the New World, and more than 400 years later, this ancient system still endures.

Today, about a thousand acequias continue to operate throughout New Mexico, but most traditional acequias are in the northern part of the state. Scattered throughout the area, these irrigation canals can be seen from near and far. About four feet wide and half as deep, they follow the contour of the land--threading through valleys, winding around trees, boulders, and hills, irrigating fields and pastures. They are the people's connection to the land, bringing life-sustaining water to their small towns and villages. These ancient waterways and the water they carry symbolize the spirit of a community, its social cohesiveness, economic welfare, and sense of historical continuity. Sustained by religious beliefs and practices that penetrate the day-to-day lives of the people, they are as much a part of the culture as the Catholic Church. [ILLUSTRATION OMITTED]

In a land where water supplies depend primarily on the whims of nature--how much or how little rain falls in the summer, how much winter snow piles up in the mountains, how great and when summer runoff will be--man has devised a way to control the water that is available, delivering it to where it is needed most.

In a state frequently ravaged by drought, the acequia system operates a under repartimiento (water sharing) system in proportion to what the various groups of people in the system need. Farmers and ranchers have first choice at the available water, and the rest is divvied up until all who need it get a share. This sharing of water--and the fighting over it--has bound neighbors by allegiance or by feud for hundreds of years. Native Americans fought each other over water, the Spanish fought the Native Americans, and the Anglo settlers fought the Spanish.

David Lopez of El Valle remembers his mother patrolling the Las Trampas ditch with her shotgun. (Back then, in the 1940s and 1950s, it was common for women to tend the fields and acequias when the men had to leave the villages to seek work as miners, loggers, and sheepherders in Colorado and Wyoming.) Decades later, people still occasionally fight over this most essential resource.

It is said that the two complete certainties in life are death and taxes. Another certainty is that every year the acequias need to be cleared of debris and repaired. Each spring, all along the upper Rio Grande, the sound of rakes and shovels dominates the otherwise quiet landscape. For as long as anyone can remember, communities that depend on the acequias participate in an annual rite of spring, drawing villagers young and old--Hispanic, Native American, and Anglo--for a day of digging ditches. "It's a tradition that has gone on for many years and keeps us together," said one villager.

Mayordomos (foremen who control the headgates of their respective ditches) preside over the process of clearing the acequias. They make sure the weeds and debris are removed so that water can flow freely to each community. More importantly, they distribute water to each parciante.

With the cleaning of the acequias come the annual problems of easements and trespassing. "Every year you hear about fights," said Miguel Santistevan whose family has been in the Taos valley since the mid 1700s. "It's not racial. It's just that Anglo newcomers buying property with an irrigation ditch running through their land have no idea that these ditches are part of a communal property structure similar to the land grants and that they have easements giving mayordomos and others the right to cross on their land to clean them."

Cleaning acequias is hard, back-breaking work; it gets done but the parciantes are getting older. When they die, there is no one to replace them because many young people move away or show no interest in getting involved.

In recent years, Santistevan noticed that fewer and fewer people were showing up for the annual spring cleaning of the acequia running through his property, the Acequia Sur del Rio Fernando. Several years ago he told the community they needed to bring in the next generation of parciantes.

In 2006, the Northern New Mexico Acequia Association formed Sembrando Semillas (Planting Seeds), a youth program committed to training the future farmers and ranchers who will keep the acequia tradition alive and well. Teenagers are recruited from villages like Questa, Mora, Chamisal, and Pecos. Natives of their respective areas, they learn hands-on from their group mentors about seasonal agricultural activities: how to prepare the fields, plant and irrigate and harvest.

"Youth interested in agriculture are those who learned from their elders, who might speak Spanish as a first language at home," Santistevan said. They have a lot of respect for their elders and like to spend time with their grandparents, helping out their families and planting gardens. "They're the ones out there cleaning the acequias."

Toribio Garcia, an eighteen-year-old from Chamisal, has been in the program from the very beginning. He was so inspired that he bought a two-acre parcel of land from a neighbor and has been farming it for three years. He grows different varieties of potatoes, peas, and corn, along with garlic and other vegetables: "more than enough to feed my family and friends." Garcia has been participating in the annual ditch cleaning since he was fifteen and wants to be a mayordomo one day. "It's important to me and my culture," he said.

Although some landowners feel that in another generation the tradition of ditch digging will be lost and that these manmade ditches will eventually be replaced with cement or plastic culverts, many are confident that these beloved acequias will be around for another 400 years.

"Acequias are unique," Santistevan said, "and we're blessed to have them here in northern New Mexico."

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