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Santa Fe Acequias Alive!

A Glimpse of Surviving Acequia Culture

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This week's post is meant to correct a generally negative picture painted last week in *Death by Dessication*, where I outlined the transformation of Santa Fe from a "village" (in fact a *villa*) with strong traditions of sylvan pastoralism and acequia-based horticulture, similar in many ways to that epitome of Iberian culture, Granada, into something I disparaged as an arts-and leisure theme park. While my dismal look at what Santa Fe has suffered, I believe, contains a lot of truth, there is something basically unfair and unhelpful about representing anything out of the mainstream as doomed to disappear. We hear it all the time about land grant communities, Native American culture and, yes, acequias. That such entities persist and adapt to enormous challenges is certainly the more revealing fact.

On the playground of my elementary school, near the bank of the Arroyo de las Mascaras, stood a mature and solitary box elder tree. We knew that climbing this (to us) magnificent tree was one of the prohibitions on which playground privileges could depend, but the burls bulging from its lower trunk allowed us at least to traverse its circumference close enough to the ground so as not to bring down sanctions. At the time, many of Santa Fe's loveliest shade trees were of this species, but it has all but disappeared from the greater city. Francis Elmore (*Shrubs and Trees of the Southwest Uplands*) notes that box elders were commonly planted as shade trees because of their rapid growth, but that the trees tended to be short lived. No wonder the mature box elders of my childhood are long gone.

But there is another observation on which all of my field guides agree: the box elder naturally occurs along stream banks. It seems likely that Santa Fe's dozens of acequias would have provided the "stream bank" habitat, and would also have distributed seeds from the box elder *bosque* along the upstream Santa Fe River. As the acequias dried up and disappeared – replaced by ungenerous water pipes – Santa Fe became increasingly inhospitable to this once widespread species. Not surprising, then, that my recent weeks of acequia stalking would have put me back in touch with the trees that so abundantly populate my childhood memories.

Phillip Bové, an Acequia Madre commissioner, allowed me a generous interview as I was preparing this post, and he gave me an apparently self-compiled booklet called *Notes on the Acequia Madre de Santa Fe* dated May 2007. In it, there is an unattributed text that reads like an address honoring the City's reclamation of the Railyard. Details suggest that it was written by

Bové's wife, native *santafesina* Eleanor Bové née Ortiz, and it includes a passage that captures beautifully the complex intersection of historical and natural relations that is the post-colonial social ecology of acequia culture in Santa Fe:

In those days right before the Spring run-off the state penitentiary trustees cleaned the ditch. Even though we could see the rifles in the guards' hands, we would sneak tortillas to the prisoners through the boxelder and pussy willows growing along the acequia's banks.

As I continue to learn about the history of Santa Fe's acequias, it seems fitting and not at all random that an acequia should be the backdrop for a scene of such basic human solidarity and (tiny) acts of resistance. And box elders make up the tissue of that backdrop. In continuation are a dozen recent photographs that show aspects of Santa Fe's ongoing acequia history, with captions intended to situate the images within an historical context.

Situated just above the Randall Davy House (a.k.a. the Audubon Center) on Upper Canyon Road, is a remnant section of the appropriately named Power Ditch, appropriate both because it brought water to the Santa Fe Power Company generators and because it is emblematic of the water and power utility's claim of a "paramount" right to appropriate the waters of the Santa Fe River. PNM, the utility's successor, had its power checked by State District Court Judge Art Encinias in *Anaya v. PNM*, June 22, 1990. Judge Encinias affirmed the priority water rights of the plaintiffs – the Acequia del Cerro Gordo and the Acequia Madre – and ordered defendant PNM to release reservoir water for use by the acequias. Resembling the hull of a ship, this metal-lined section is approximately five feet across at the top; other steeper stretches of this century-old structure are unlined earthen ditch.