

## La Jicarita

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Acequias, Development, water and acequias

# Development and Drought in Placitas: Las Acequias Feel the Pain

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I lived in Placitas for twenty years, from 1971 to 1991, when my family and I moved to El Valle. For some of those years I was a parciante on Las Acequias de Placitas, the village ditch system fed by springs and held in ponds above the community. In a recent article in the *Sandoval Signpost*, the community newspaper published by Barb and Ty Belknap, Ty wrote an article, "[2012 Placitas Beanfield War](#)" about conflict among the parciantes created by the diminished waters of Las Acequias and the two other irrigation systems in the Placitas vicinity. It's a familiar story all over el norte, of course, as less acequia water becomes available due to compromised watersheds, extended drought, and climate change.

Placitas, however, is a complicated community whose waters have been impacted by more than the above-mentioned causes. In a letter to the *Signpost* at the beginning of 2012, longtime resident Lynn Montgomery claims that Placitas is "actually a traditional Norteño community with all the elements that such communities up north have": a land grant, acequias, and land-based culture. What Lynn also claims, that Placitas has "a long-standing anti-the-rest-of-the-world and intense activism," is the product of a culture clash: first, the arrival of the back-to-the-land generation in the 1960s and 70s; and second, the arrival of the real estate developers and suburbia in the 80s and 90s. I'll come back to these impacts in a minute.

Briefly, the situation with the three Placitas acequias is extreme and contested. The springs that feed the Acequia de la Rosa de Castilla, below the village, dried up in June, and with little rain during the so-called "monsoon" season of July and August, farms along lower Las Huertas valley dried up as well. This story was heartbreakingly told in Ari LeVaux's blog, *Flash in the Pan*, "[Megadrought, the new normal.](#)" Montgomery, the Rosa de Castilla mayordomo, has long claimed that the proliferation of wells in the Placitas area has impacted the regeneration of the springs, and as a senior water rights holder he protested a water transfer case all the way to the New Mexico Supreme Court: the developer eventually withdrew the request.

Placitas ditch cleaning crew in the 1970s. Photo by Kay Matthews

When the springs above Placitas began to dry up, parciantes on Las Acequias de Placitas, which serves the village, accused parciantes on Las Huertas Community Ditch, fed by Las Huertas Creek (the only perennial stream system in the Sandia Mountains) of over diverting the creek (the

subsurface flow of the creek feeds the springs in the village). After some monkey wrenching inflicted on the Las Huertas diversion dam, the parties took the conflict to the Office of the State Engineer, always a dangerous thing to do when trying to sort out and protect senior water rights.

Montgomery's activism with regard to acequia depletions caused by residential wells is only one facet of the "long-standing anti-rest-of-the-world" acts of protest during the makeover of this once traditional village. Although the back-to-the-land immigrants certainly thought of themselves as benign—their intent was not to change the nature of the Hispano community but to integrate into a village that exemplified values they shared—the simple fact that the alternative generation *came* opened the door to the *next* invasion, the money makers.

Most of the folks who came in the '60s and '70s emulated the traditional building style of the long time Hispano residents of the village or saw homebuilding as venues for their creativity, constrained only by the capacity of their pocket books. But at the same time several Anglo families bought chunks of land around the village for a small percentage of their eventual worth and began subdividing the property. The McKinnon family developed what was to become one of the largest subdivisions in the area, Ranchos de Placitas. The McCallister family bought up land in the Las Huertas valley between the national forest and the village and built houses of ranch-style frame and brick, quickly dubbed Gringo Gulch (these homes are on the Las Huertas Community Ditch). Rumbblings of discontent erupted into direct action when the sales-office trailer in Ranchos de Placitas was bashed and real estate signs were burned and defaced. These were spontaneous acts that reflected local resentment—from both the Hispano community and the alternative generation—toward the more affluent people moving into these developments, people who came to Placitas because of a great view and an easy commute to Albuquerque.

That was only the beginning. In 1981 two Placitas couples, Steve and Wendy Gudelj and Rick and Pepi Levin, formed the Placitas Land Co., a real estate firm. About the same time, the McCallister family subdivided a piece of land called Placitas Homesteads approximately three miles west of the village. A year or two later, Rick Levin, Steve Gudelj, and a third Placitas resident, Tom Ashe (married to Pepi Levin's sister Joanne), started Placitas Trails, just west of Homesteads. Tierra Madre was the next development; Norman Lazar was the prime developer, while Levin and Gudelj were partners.

The developers restricted the three subdivisions to ensure a suburban nature: covenants excluded farm animals, mobile homes, and multifamily dwellings (although townhouses were built on part of one of the subdivisions). Most of the lots were between 1.7 and 2.2 acres, at a cost of \$17,000 to \$25,000 an acre (they now go for \$60,000 or more an acre). Two of the developments, Placitas Trails and Tierra Madre, allowed houses no smaller than 1,700 square feet. Various contractors built houses in the developments (Tom Ashe was one of the busiest), but the architectural styles remained similar: sprawling frame-stucco with passive solar features.

The Placitas Land Company marketed Placitas as the ideal community for the upwardly mobile professional seeking an alternative to the urban environment of Albuquerque. One of its radio spots described Placitas as "what Santa Fe used to be and Albuquerque never was." Other ads presented Placitas as a unique community of artists, farmers, and professionals with expansive vistas and access to the national forest—the New Mexico adobe tradition in laid-back rural *ambiance*.

The developers marketed *themselves* as Placitas saviors. In an article I wrote for the *Albuquerque Journal* in 1987 ("Land Use & Lifestyle," *Albuquerque Journal Impact Magazine*, February 24, 1987) I

interviewed Rick Levin and Steve Gudelj. Referring to their Placitas Trails subdivision, Rick Levin insisted that he and Gudelj were saving us: when they heard that a developer was planning to turn the area into a mobile home park “we decided to see if we could purchase that property and turn it into a quality residential subdivision. It was a way to do something about the inevitable development of the area. The mobile home park would have been inharmonious to what we felt was going on in the area.” It’s a tactic often used in defense of an unpopular act—if we don’t do it, someone else will. The Placitas Land Co. used mobile homes as their scapegoat. Everyone loves to hate trailers, despite the fact that they are some of the only affordable housing available to people. But developers don’t make money off affordable housing. They make money off the \$500,000 homes that are built in their subdivisions.

More signs of discontent by those unwilling to cash in appeared in the ‘80s. One morning we woke up to find that the Placitas Land Co. signs, which featured a black buffalo, had been altered to depict a white buffalo mounting the original one. The company offered a reward for information about who had defaced the signs, but no culprit was publicly identified. In my *Journal* article Rick Levin said, “We know who did it. It was a statement of unhappiness by a few people who thought it would be a great joke. And we appreciated it in terms of a joke. It also expressed the sentiments of a very, very small number of people out of the total population that lives here.”

Another creative act soon added to the “joke.” A series of newsletters entitled “Placitas Unreal Estate News” were mailed to various Placitas folks, parodying the Placitas Land Co. newsletter, which was periodically mailed to the entire community, extolling the virtues of the new developments and the goods and services they made available. The Unreal Estate News offered its own version of strip mall businesses—Holistic Public Accountant, No Appointment Liposuction, Laughing Boor Art Gallery and Pine Tar Sachet Shop, Homeopathic BMW and Mercedes Benz Car Maintenance—and renamed the subdivisions—Tierra Chingada, Ranchos de Placebo, Placitas Depths, and Vista de Nouveau Riche.

Other acts were more blatant. The trailer that advertised in huge letters on its side for the Placitas Acres subdivision was rewritten to read, “Placitas Aches.” The entrance sign to Placitas Homesteads was amended to read “Placitas Homesteads sucks and so does the PLC [Placitas Land Co.],” and a street sign in Tierra Madre became “Tierra Raper.” But the development continued: strip malls became a reality; zoning was instituted; and some folks left, including me.

Photo by Kay Matthews

Placitas is not unique, of course. Things change (just ask the land grant community). People build houses. Developers build many houses. In El Valle, where I now live, we suddenly have second homes. But Placitas is emblematic of a consumer culture that is the basis of this country’s power and wealth. We became the “primary engine of capital accumulation” (David Harvey), which vastly increased the infrastructure necessary to support this kind of massive suburbanization. The housing boom in the 90s exacerbated the overbuilding and created the upper middle class culture that now dominates Placitas. Now, in the 2000s, there must be a slew of foreclosures and some nail-biting developers who won’t survive the housing bust, but the damage has been done: loss of the commons, validation of yuppie culture, and the mining of the already limited water resources of a semi-arid environment that is only going to get worse.

End Note: Lynn Montgomery e-mailed me that he is trying to convene a meeting of parcientes from all three acequias to talk about forming a Placitas regional acequia association where *repartimiento*