

# ACEQUIA HISTORY

**By Kathaleen Roberts,**  
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New Mexico's acequias have channeled life, culture and tradition to the state for more than 400 years.

"El Agua es Vida: Acequias in Northern New Mexico" merges art, science and culture at the Maxwell Museum of Anthropology at the University of New Mexico. Based on a multidisciplinary study conducted by UNM, New Mexico State University, New Mexico Tech and Sandia National Laboratories, the exhibition will be up through May 31, 2015.

Acequia irrigation and agriculture created the northern New Mexico landscape we see today.

Unique to New Mexico -- except for parts of southern Colorado and Texas -- acequias originated in Spain. Spanish explorers brought them to the state in 1539, curator Devorah Romanek said.

Every colonial settlement that took root between 1600 and 1847 required the construction of ditches to direct water for crops and livestock. These hand-dug, gravity-fed trenches lure mountain snowmelt through the state's narrow furrows and valleys and into community fields, orchards and gardens.

Before acequias veined the landscape, Pueblo, Apache and Navajo people developed their own irrigation systems as part of their farming methods. They also based their water management on community responsibility and participation.

About 42 percent of acequia-carried water recycles back into the aquifer, feeding the state's rivers, Romanek said. These handmade ditches play a vital environmental role in a state where water is an increasingly scarce and precious resource.

"So it's really the best way to manage the water here in New Mexico," she explained. "And it also has these incredible cultural and traditional ties."

The show features artwork and 130 objects relating to the digging and maintaining of acequias, as well their end products in farming and cooking.

A Bolivian painting of San Ysidro, the patron saint of farmers, shows him tapping an acequia with his staff, surrounded by cattle, horses and birds. Likely painted by an indigenous artist, it dates to 1825, the year the country was liberated from Spain, Romanek said.

A commissioned painting of the Taos Valley by the muralist George Chacon illustrates the cycle of water revitalizing the aquifer as it seeps through the ground. It shows the "hydrosocial cycle," encompassing human settlement based on agriculture within a watershed. The pattern involves flood irrigation, return flow and the refeeding of the aquifer.

There's a wooden head gate for explorers to pull up and push down, an old shovel donated by famed El Ritosantero Nicholas Herrera, as well as a pair of overalls and rubber boots worn by

the majordomo or ditch boss, elected by the community to be in charge of the acequia. Everyone who uses the acequia is expected to help clean it or to hire others to perform the task, Romanek said. The cleaning removes weeds and trash, as well as erosion. A rectangular shovel squares the ditch to prevent dirt from spilling down sloping sides.

The rusted half of a 1950-53 Dodge pickup demonstrates the typical mode of transportation to and from the acequias. Romanek scavenged it from an Albuquerque salvage yard.

A "waterscape" section reveals the larger cultural context of acequias through farming, cooking and faded family photographs donated by Herrera. A bumper sticker proclaiming "Our Acequias, Life, Culture, Tradition" illuminates the political conflict that ensues when communities clash with local, state and federal authorities. In the 1980s local acequia associations began forming regional coalitions to protect and defend their common interests against such threats as the transfer of water rights.

There's even a collection of tin cans littering the bottom of a display case.

The quality and type of trash reveals who lives along the acequia, Romanek added, whether it's beer cans or soccer balls. If you go

WHAT: "El Agua es Vida: Acequias in Northern New Mexico"

WHEN: Through May 31, 2015

WHERE : Maxwell Museum of Anthropology, University of New Mexico

HOW MUCH: Free. Call 277-4405 or visit [maxwellmuseum.unm.edu](http://maxwellmuseum.unm.edu)

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