

# GREEN FIRE TIMES

*News & Views from the Sustainable Southwest*

## La limpia de las Acequias – El Trabajo de Todos

**By Alejandro López**

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**The annual cleaning of the acequias is also a cleansing of the mind. El Cerrito, 2018 –**

**Photo by Alejandro Lopez**

*Algo que creímos ser tan difícil se puede lograr si uno se entrega completamente a la obra. Cuando lo acabas te das cuenta que lo que lograste es más grande que lo que te imaginabas.*

*Something we thought was so difficult can be achieved if we persist. When you actually do it, the result is beyond your imagination.*

– Zizhuo Shi, Buddhist nun, Xiang Guang Shan Temple, Taiwan

If the world should ever be renewed through august teamwork and cooperation, it will probably begin in an obscure village of about 10 stone houses somewhere along the Río Pecos in New Mexico's San Miguel County.

Earlier this spring, an indefatigable team of nearly 40 people of varied ages and backgrounds converged on a particular hamlet in the early morning hours as the sun was just peeking over the horizon. They uncomplainingly threw themselves into the monumental task of shoveling out four to six inches of sediment that had accumulated at the bottom of their acequia over the previous year.

With unrivaled dedication, they did not stop—except for the mandatory lunch break—until they had finished and could look back on an acequia worthy of receiving the life-giving waters that a few days later would trickle down this meandering man made earthen channel to thirsty fields below. All told, they had dug two continuous miles.

The men and women, attired in work clothes that included blue jeans and overalls, long-sleeve shirts, boots, hats and gloves, began the arduous task near the atarque or diversion dam where this particular acequia begins. The atarque spans the river and raises the water level so that it is able to flow easily into the carved channel when the compuerta or headgate is opened each time that water is needed. In the past, atarques were built by collective community effort using large stones and logs piled high on top of each other. However, modern ones, such as in this community, are carefully designed by engineers and built by experienced contractors using cement and steel.

Before the acequeros (usually parcientes or community acequia water users or their paid representatives called peones or workers) ever arrived, the mayordomo and perhaps a helper or two had walked the entire distance and sectioned off approximately five-yard lengths marked with small, highly visible, gouged-out holes that ran the length of one of the edges of the acequia's bed. Each of these sections, known as a tarea or assignment, is "adopted" by any member of the working crew. Each individual takes responsibility for cleaning that section before going on to another one farther down the acequia. Because of this provision, which makes it very clear to the workers what the procedure is, there is no confusion, and everyone is self-directed and moving at their own pace. Tareas also ensure the safety of the peones because the generous amount of space granted each person enables him or her to stay clear of another's flying shovelful of dirt, or even a shovel itself. In spite of this arrangement, it was common that day to see people helping complete each other's tarea.

One would quickly despair of ever finishing if this work had to be done alone. However, when there are 40 other people working with equal resolve, one becomes empowered and quickly falls into step. It feels like the entire phalanx of men and women is somehow contributing to your own work. In our modern, highly fragmented, mechanized workplaces, people rarely experience this level of cooperation and synchronization of so much energy and ánimo.

Cleaning an acequia for several hours in a large group enables participants to experience the bedrock history of their particular acequia as well as the spirit of public works and monumental projects built the world over and in previous ages. Large numbers of people gave shape to their collective dreams through collaborative, labor-intensive work. Only when one commits to scraping four or five inches of soil from the bottom of an acequia does one thoroughly appreciate the enormous effort and dedication that previous generations poured into the creation of these four-foot-deep by eight- or 10-foot-wide, two-mile-long channels built with but the most rudimentary of tools.

It gives me great inner strength to know that our ancestors could muster this level of energy and commitment to such a bold and daunting engineering feat. Though separated by centuries from those who built this awesome watercourse, everyone who participated in the limpia could feel a strong connection with them.

It would be a mistake to think that the limpia de las acequias is all work. There is time for rest, for interaction with others and for walking along the acequia's banks past scores of individuals who are still working below as one makes one's way to the next tarea. From time to time, people working beside each other might share particular bits of knowledge regarding the river, the acequia, or the village. They laugh and tell jokes. They talk about the way things were or might be in the future or philosophize about the vagaries of life's ups and downs. If one is lucky, one might make new friends.

At lunchtime, everyone left their shovels standing upright in the acequia's moist soil, at times with crumpled gloves ingeniously secured to the handles. This is a way of signaling that they would be back to complete the job.

Several days before, villager families had been preparing huge amounts of Nuevomexicano soul food. Any worker could pretty much wander into anyone's home and be fed. Others went directly to their family homes. The huge spread laid out on kitchen tables usually included green and red chicken enchiladas, beans and red chile stew (as if enchiladas by themselves could not deliver the minimum daily dosage of chile), salad, flour tortillas, natillas, rice pudding, panocha, apple pie and coffee. The peones ate with unmitigated gusto, and deservedly so.

At one home there were a couple of older musicians with guitars. Their time-honored songs seemed to soothe one's fatigue and aches and pains, as well as "bring on the good old times." That day, an aura of peace and goodwill seemed to envelop the entire village whose soon-to-be-watered fields harbored fruit trees that had broken out in a riot of delicate, fuchsia blossoms.

Indeed, were the world to be renewed from this beloved and deeply revered place and by the energy of the selfless people who had converged there, ours would be a gloriously beautiful,

happy, bountiful and peaceful world such as we all hunger for but which mostly we are at a loss in knowing how to bring forth.

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