

High Country News

This acequia life

The irrigation of the land defines our West in ways I can hardly explain.

By Leeanna Torres

High Country News, April 30, 2018

From the porch near the house, I see Papa in the distance, shovel on his shoulder, his outline as familiar as his presence. Egrets graze along the water that moves in and across the field, alfalfa plants brightening the morning with a welcoming green. The swallows — *las golondrinas* — fly down and across the water, grasping at food too small for me to see. And Papa walks his field, slower now with age, his boots soaking up water, wearing them as the only lovely he knows.

San Isidro, the patron saint of farmers, is said to have been extremely pious. My father, on the other hand, is impatient, bossy and sometimes quick-tempered. He eats far too much sugar. San Isidro, an icon in New Mexico, is said to have had a faith larger than mountains. My father sometimes curses. Even so, I sometimes imagine him standing there in his field with San Isidro, both men just trying to find their way into a meaningful life among the seasons of growth and harvest, knowing there are never any guarantees, never any promise or prospect in this *acequia* life.

Acequia is a word. *Acequia* is a place.

Acequias evolved over 10,000 years in the deserts of the Middle East and were introduced into southern Spain by the Moors. Later, Spanish colonizers introduced *acequias* to the American Southwest, long before the land was claimed by the United States. *Acequia* is the irrigation conveyance system, the canal, all the infrastructure that delivers water from the river, the Rio Grande, to the fields. But *acequia* is also a way of life, a presence. *Acequia* defines our West in ways that I can hardly explain.

Heading out into the field, I meet Papa halfway between the house and the water's edge. The water moves slowly, inching along between soil and plant. I imagine San Isidro next to Papa like an apparition, a spirit watching him as Papa's hands grip the *compuerta* wheel, turning it counterclockwise, water rushing through as the metal gate lifts up by the strength of his aging arms and hands. It is river water that quenches the thirst of Papa's alfalfa fields. Color of the water brown, like coffee with cream, a color cliché in the great American Southwest. The color of adobe. Color of my soul.



El Cerrito y La Acequia Madre: A Village Life Portrait — Lalo Irrigating.
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Papa looks at his watch as he determines the time and speed of the water over the field. “How much longer?” I ask, and he leans onto the handle of his shovel. “Another hour, *mas o menos*,” he replies, his “Spanglish” as familiar and reassuring to me as his worn hands and hat. He’s been up since 2 a.m., “checking the water” as they say in the valley. We remain there, just looking out into the field, each in our own thoughts. Off in the distance, a kestrel balances on the barbed wire.

I sense Papa is tired, but he won’t admit it. He labors with a hernia he won’t have fixed. To ease his arthritis, he pops large pills of ibuprofen. Rather than taking care of his diabetes, he carries miniature candy bars in the pockets of his jacket, neatly tucked away. He resents men who take vacations, watch sports on the weekend, wear sandals and lounge around in the living room. Papa irrigates fields, brands cattle, repairs tractors, and never has enough daylight. The work he loves is also wearing him down, but he can’t give it up, and so he laces on his boots every morning, devoting himself to a land that has never promised to sustain him. Water supply is shrinking, due to rising water demands and climate change, but still, he continues.

Does any part of him secretly want to give this up and buy a townhouse in Albuquerque? Would he rather spend his days in a comfortably worn recliner, changing the cable channels, watching documentaries about presidents and wars? I want to ask him, but I know his answer would be unspoken. He communicates much like the water itself, speaking only through movement.

I'll continue to wait for the day Papa admits he is tired. Until then, I imagine him alongside San Isidro, not because my father is a saint, but because he both inspires and baffles me. San Isidro is often depicted as a humble man, a saint bowing his head. As the *golondrinas* circle around us, Papa takes a similar stance: He leans on the handle of his shovel, tool of the earthen *acequia*, speaking the unspoken language of this land he just cannot give up.

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