

## ‘An erosion of the culture of the acequias’

By Daniel J. Chacón |

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“Bring your *pala* so you can do some Pilates.”

Of course, William Gonzales is joking. No one in their right mind would use a shovel to do Pilates, and Pilates isn’t on Gonzales’ mind. Work is. His play on Spanish and English words that sound alike simply reflects his jovial personality.

But cleaning acequias, a time-honored tradition in communities across Northern New Mexico and beyond, is no fun and games — especially when the work is accomplished with nothing more than muscle and a shovel as Gonzales has been doing on the ditch that irrigates his property in this forgotten village about 12 miles southeast of Las Vegas.

Though satisfying to see the first gush of water finally flow through the man-made irrigation ditch, cleaning acequias is back-breaking work that Gonzales, 68, has known since laboring alongside his father as early as the age of 8.

“My dad would probably clean about 90 percent, and I’d probably clean about 10 percent,” he said with a chuckle.

Much has changed since then.

The annual ritual of cleaning acequias, typically before the start of spring, remains alive in communities big and small, from Chama to Alcalde and Gallina to Sombrillo. But the practice has evolved and adapted as times have changed, from a lack of interest in farming to the purchase of agricultural lands by newcomers who don’t participate in the yearly cleanup.

“One of the most common challenges that one hears today is that acequias have difficulty finding *peones*, or laborers,” said Paula Garcia, executive director of the New Mexico Acequia Association. “According to custom, which is actually codified in many acequia bylaws, acequia members, or *parciantes*, are required to provide *peones* as part of their responsibility to the acequia. Generally, the number of *peones* is in proportion to the amount of land or water rights owned by the *parciante*.”

Even when *peones* are found, Mary Mascareñas of Llano said their work ethic isn’t what it used to be.

“*Habido veces que tienen que descargarlos porque han estado, como dicen, con el pisto o la hierbita,*” she said in Spanish, describing situations in which workers have been sent home early because they’ve been drinking alcohol or smoking weed.

In Llano, Mascareñas said, a new crop of property owners who are mostly white either don’t participate in the cleanup or want to change customs.

“Some of the newcomers want to bring in their own ideas,” she said. “For example, we have one in our area that didn’t like for us to use the word ‘*mayordomo*.’ They want ‘stream rider’ or whatever it is.”

For landowners who are either disengaged or altogether absent, a related challenge is the issue of access, Garcia said. The acequias depend on access through private property.

“Some landowners have blocked access even though acequias have a legal easement through the acequia and for a certain width on either side,” Garcia said. “In some cases, there have been violent confrontations or there have been cases filed in courts where acequias have to assert their enforcement powers.”

On the ground, the practice of cleaning ditches is known as “*sacando la acequia*.” The word “*sacando*” translates to “taking out,” which more accurately describes the need to remove brush, rocks, overgrown grass, silt and anything else that gets in the way. It also implies a more rigorous and physical activity than simply just cleaning the ditch.

Dennis Quintana of Sombrillo remembers the days when dozens of acequia members or their workers would get together to clean the community ditch. Now, the most that have shown up are around 20.

“It’s a big difference between now and then,” he said. “Back then, we had a bunch of people. You should’ve seen.”

But if the tradition is changing in some places, it’s also coming back in others. Garcia said other acequias report renewed interest in participating as a *peon*, whether it be people who are new to the community and want to learn about local traditions or others who have roots and want to retain their cultural heritage.

Garcia recalled the late author Estevan Arellano sharing an ancient quote from Spain. She said Arellano was lamenting the difficulty of finding an adequate number of laborers for the demanding work of cleaning acequias.

“The point ... was that working collectively has been a challenge for humanity for thousands of years and continues to be so,” she said.

Another challenge, according to Quintana and Mascareñas, is that a lot of acequia members are aging.

“The people that have land are getting older, so they can’t go, and they have to look for help so they hire help to go,” Mascareñas said. “But it’s not the same as when [property owners] go out and work because they care for their lands. It’s very different.”

Quintana said his acequia association encourages young people to participate in the cleanup.

“They need to learn what the acequia is and what they need to do because someday, somebody is going to have to take over because we’re getting old,” he said, adding that girls are also encouraged to get involved in what has traditionally been work done by men.

“Oh, man, you should see those girls work,” Quintana said. “They go get it done.”

For acequia members like Gonzales, who belongs to the New Mexico Acequia Commission, the biggest and most disappointing change has been the end of neighbors getting together to clean the ditch. In recent

years, each acequia member has been responsible for cleaning a certain portion of the ditch individually, and many have used mechanical means, such as backhoes.

“I miss that community effort,” Gonzales said while taking a break from cleaning a ditch Friday afternoon.

“When we used to clean as a group, with the *mayordomo* and everybody working together, that’s when the exchange of family histories took place,” he said. “I would ask, ‘What are you going to plant this year?’ They would say, ‘*Voy a sembrar maíz* [corn]. *Voy a sembrar chile.*’ I would say, ‘Do you need seed? Do you need help?’

“All those transactions happened at that time that you were out there on the ditch together,” he added. “Once we quit doing that together ... you didn’t have any kind of personal interaction with that individual. You didn’t talk about your plans for the year, how you’re feeling today, anything. That’s not the system of the acequias. The acequia system is a communal system. It breeds on the idea of a community effort. With that part of the acequia kind of going away, it’s an erosion of the culture of the acequias.”

In New Mexico, acequias date back hundreds of years.

“Acequias have deep roots in New Mexico history,” Garcia said. “Pueblos had sophisticated water harvesting and irrigation methods long before Spanish and Mexican settlement, but the acequia as a community-based institution, along with the customs and traditions of water sharing and distribution, is distinctly Spanish-Moorish in origin.”

Garcia said acequias originated in arid lands “where scarcity was the norm.”

“The word ‘acequia’ has Arabic origins and translates roughly to ‘quencher of thirst’ or ‘bearer of water,’” she said. “Acequias embody a water ethic of sharing scarce water because of the necessity of survival amid limited water supplies. This made acequias uniquely adaptable to the arid high desert of New Mexico.”

Ralph Vigil, chairman of the New Mexico Acequia Commission, said acequias changed the face of the state.

“Acequias are New Mexico,” said Vigil, an organic farmer in Pecos.

“Native Americans had “primitive forms of irrigation, but this basically put New Mexico on the map as far as how it could be irrigated and how food can be grown here in such an arid area, so they need to be respected and people really need to take a second look and take a second thought when they think that acequias aren’t important anymore,” he said. “It’s not just irrigation. It’s the life that they bring to the community, and not just the community as people but the community at large. The trees, the wildlife, the plant life, everything that helps sustain us.”

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