

William R. Carleton Environmental Historian: Collector of Stories

Gordene MacKenzie, Los Ranchos Historical Society

“The history of a people is intricately entwined with the history of the plants they grow, consume, and, sometimes, celebrate.” Environmental historian and Agri-Nature Center Agricultural Program Manager William (Willy) Carleton’s book *Fruit, Fiber and Fire: A History of Modern Agriculture in New Mexico* provides an in-depth history of three twentieth-century New Mexico crops, apples (fruit), cotton (fiber), and chile (fire). He uncovers the impact that industrialization, modernity, and powerful cultural effects have had on agriculture. Willy’s book deservedly received the Fray Francisco Atanasio Dominguez NM Historical Society Book Award, given for an outstanding publication that makes a significant contribution to historic survey and research in New Mexico.

I recently had the pleasure of interviewing Willy while we walked around the Agri-Nature Center. The recorded conversation is accompanied by the sounds of cranes and leaves crunching under our feet. “I love storytelling. A lot of farmers don’t realize they are storytellers,” he said. Willy collects stories that reflect the shifting and complex relationship between humans and the natural world.

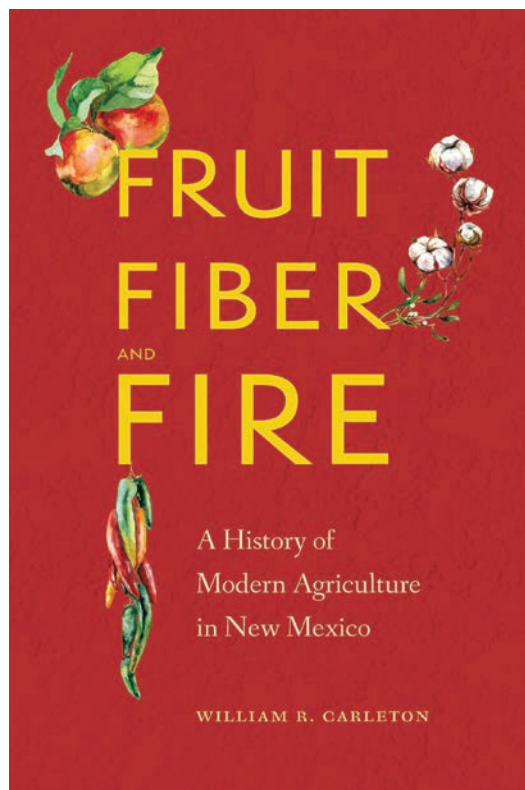
His book chronicles the migrations of plants and people weaving a rich tapestry of the social, cultural and environmental history of New Mexico. Each crop inspired multiple myths and stories that embraced or resisted modernity. Some of these stories were crafted by executives like the one that linked apples with the garden of Eden. Other stories were told by local chile farmers from around the state, including the pueblos. The northern and southern regions of the state split about what constituted the best chile. Southern farmers were more likely to grow the larger Big Jim chile, which had been created in a lab. Hatch dubbed itself the Chile capitol of the world. Northern farmers scoffed at the Big Jim chile, charging it was the “size of a

banana and tasted like cardboard.” Chimayo and the Pueblos became known for landrace chile that was hot, long and wrinkled.

“How we understand history can help us avoid some of the pitfalls and reimagine the crops of the future.” The impact of the historical crops on the land ranged from growing a monoculture and mandatory spraying for insects that exhausted the soil and the workers, to a successful cotton farmer who planted diverse crops and created housing and a pension plan for workers. The latter, Stahmann farm, has been an inspiration for Willy who stated, “They are still growing a diversity of crops that we don’t see today on large scale farms, and they used geese for weeding cotton.” Willy is planning to bring a couple of Chinese weeder geese to help weed at the Agri-Nature Center.

“Something important when I think about Environmental History is our relationship with the environment and moving away from thinking of the environment as an object and moving more toward relational of how we all fit together in this big web. One big reason I took this job is I feel it is an opportunity for many of us in the community to reconnect with the land.”

In addition to being a writer and researcher, and former editor of *Edible NM*, Willy is also an educator who helps aspiring farmers and gardeners. Some of his recent projects include learning how to grow crops as water becomes scarcer. Willy interviewed four Los Ranchos farmers and wrote about their land use. He has also written a stunning collection of “Love Letters to a Desert Garden.” Read them and more at <https://desertgarden.substack.com>



LOS RANCHOS HISTORICAL SOCIETY UPDATE

UPCOMING EVENTS

January 30, Thursday, 5:30PM
Agri-Nature Center

4920 Rio Grande Blvd. NW

A Conversation with William R. Carleton,
Los Ranchos Environmental Historian and
author of the Award-winning book, *Fruit,
Fiber, and Fire: A History of Modern
Agriculture in New Mexico*.

Free and Everyone Welcome

Co-sponsored with the Agri-Nature Center

In February

David Montoya will share his extensive and
life-long knowledge on the History of the
Acequias in Los Ranchos. Check our
website for the date, time and location.

MORE INFORMATION

View a video recording of Sue Kaplan
Lentz's talk "Nat Kaplan, Los Ranchos
Designer and Adobe Builder in Harmony
with the Earth." View other videos and find
info on upcoming speakers on our website

www.LosRanchosHistoricalSociety.org

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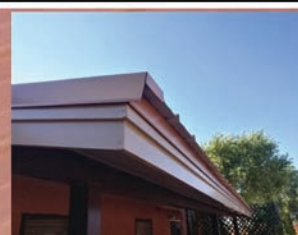
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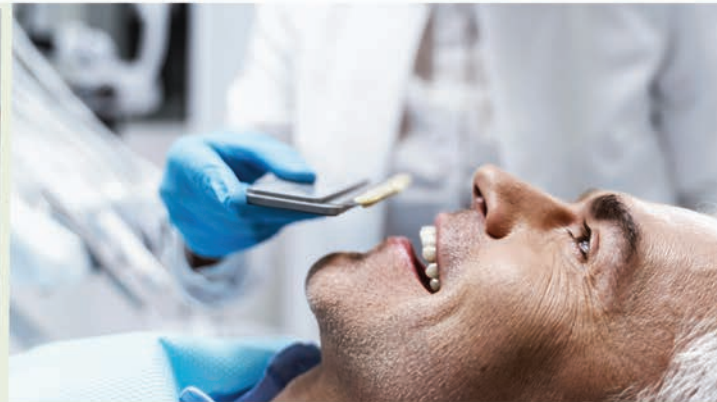
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Acequia Agriculture

ITS VALUE AND FUTURE
IN THE VILLAGE OF LOS RANCHOS

By William Carleton, Agricultural Program Director

The semi-rural nature of the village of Los Ranchos is immediately apparent as you drive north of Griegos along Rio Grande Boulevard and pass the large, sweeping fields of the village's Agri-Nature Center. These fields have long depended on the centuries-old, serpentine irrigation ditches of our Village for their health and expansive verdant abundance.

Recently, however, the Agri-Nature Center lost its lease with the MRGCD, placing its ability to irrigate many of its largest fields and its orchard in peril. The Village is currently considering whether to secure new water rights for the property, a decision that will have an impact both for the long-term viability of the Agri-Nature Center but also for the agricultural character of the Village.

As many farms throughout the region have transitioned to wells in recent years, the role of the acequia farming in our valley has only grown more important. On an environmental level, acequia farming is a significant factor in recharging groundwater, which all wells rely on. Acequia farming also ensures that the ditches stay full and active; if farmers stop using the ditches, irrigation managers will cut back on that

water, leading to drier conditions for the surrounding vegetation and habitat the ditches support.

More broadly, farming with acequia water allows farmers to irrigate using gravity alone, without the energy inputs needed to run wells, and it allows farmers to avoid plastic use for irrigation. The world uses over twelve million tons of plastic annually in food production alone, and only a tiny fraction of it is recycled. A significant amount ends up in the soil as microplastic pollution, which accumulates in soils to the detriment of soil health and, over time, human health.

Farming with acequias also makes it easier to provide wildlife habitat, as well as windbreaks and other erosion controls, on the edges of the ditches and fields.

On a social level, farming with acequia water carries with it a long-held sense of community. It requires coordination and working with neighbors toward a common goal, which can be difficult but can also yield new and deeply rewarding relationships. Beyond that, there is an art to growing food with acequias, a steadily disappearing art that is valuable not simply as a nostalgic relic of the past but as a uniquely well-adapted and place-based tool of resiliency for our future.



The Agri-Nature Center is an ideal place to help revive and preserve this art.

As we face a drier future, the acequias of our region will be tested. To function properly for the whole, they need to be used, they need to be protected, and they need to be cherished as the unique and invaluable infrastructure they are. As Emily Vogler recently wrote in *Edible New Mexico*, “As the landscape has shifted around them, acequias have become an integral part of the region’s hydrology, ecology, and culture.” While Santa Fe and Las Cruces have experienced abandonment of acequias, “In Albuquerque, there are still hundreds of miles of interconnected acequias that make the city a unique place to live and that, if protected and properly managed, have the potential to help shape the future of the city.”



In the Village of Los Ranchos, the acequias have long been a defining element of its agricultural character. They have watered our fields and vineyards, orchards and gardens. Our cottonwood-lined ditches provide important wildlife habitat and recreational trails. They recharge the water table and keep our valley green. They play a large role in preserving our village’s semi-rural identity, in protecting and enhancing our natural environment, and ensuring the continued viability of the Agri-Nature Center. As the Agri-Nature Center plans for the 2025 season and beyond, all eyes are on the acequias.

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