

Stories & History of the Land and Acequias in Los Ranchos

by David Montoya

Edited by Gordene MacKenzie, Los Ranchos Historical Society.

The featured speaker for the Los Ranchos Historical Society on June 28th was David Montoya, a longtime resident of Los Ranchos, a rancher, farmer, community activist, and business owner. He spoke to a standing room only audience. His multimedia presentation was aided by his wife Pam, and his daughters Cherie, Felicia, and Maria. Midway through his talk David invited us "to enjoy a taste of Atole that was always present in our home, made from blue corn meal." Artifacts David showed included a painting of the San Jose chapel by Los Ranchos artist Allen Leary. Watch David's talk at www.losranchohistoricalociety.org.



I was raised on El Pueblo and 4th Street. My family has been in New Mexico since the 1500s.

In 1904, a devastating flood destroyed most of Los Ranchos including the old plaza of Los Ranchos and the Los Ranchos San Jose Capilla (chapel). The floods turned the land into a salt marsh. The flood didn't break the community; it brought it together.

People from the surrounding communities worked together to build a levee with shovels, bare hands, horses, wagons and a lot of determination. That levee protected the valley and laid the foundation for later improvements in the 1930's by MRGCD. Those early community efforts remind us that we don't just inherit land—we inherit the duty to protect it.

Every spring families came together to clean the acequias, mostly by hand. We were fortunate because my grandfather had a horse-drawn ditch plow. Each spring my mom sent me to collect tatonies and cotton. "Gather the cotton and I will make you a pillow," she said. I loved how her hands moved so quickly removing the husks. She let me stuff the pillows. "You must be gentle, quick, light and efficient and ready to throw out any unsuitable cotton," she said. In March, when water



From top to bottom: David's mother, Priscilla standing to the right in front of their house; David Montoya today; The Los Ranchos church that was washed away in the flood of 1904.

Opposite page: Marcelino and Miquilita, David's grandfather and grandmother.

started flowing in the ditches, my grandmother sent me to gather wild asparagus from the ditch banks.

[GM note: David asked Maria, his daughter, to read the story he wrote of how his family came to Los Ranchos as he was too choked up to read it.]

My grandma Miquilita's oldest brother Don Juan Chavez, a wealthy businessman, was having a hard time raising his many children after his wife died. He asked grandma to bring her family to join and help him in his luxurious home in Los Ranchos. She and her family packed everything in a covered wagon. When they arrived, they weren't welcomed into his home but relegated to a converted drafty and lice-ridden chicken house where Tio Juan left his children in grandma's care.

Grandpa Marcelino stayed long enough to remodel and clean the place, then left to work in the Santa Rita Mine in Silver City. Grandma worried about him working in the mines where many men were seriously injured and often killed, not to mention the serious labor issues of the time. She managed to save enough money to purchase a tripa (long narrow strip of irrigated land) of 7 acres half a mile north of Juan's house. Grandma wrote asking grandpa to visit, as she had big surprise. Grandpa arrived after a hard journey by train, horseback, and covered wagon. Grandma said, "here is your gift" and showed him the land. Grandpa stood speechless, lifted my grandma in the air and fell on his knees in the dirt.

He laughed and cried as he picked up the earth in his hands. He washed his children with the soil in his hands and gathered them with grandma in his arms and prayed and blessed the ground. He was so happy. There were tears running down his cheeks that made mud on his face. The same mud that appeared on all of their faces.

After leveling the land, he grew produce of all kinds and later raised dairy cows.

Everyone loved my grandpa. I was proud to travel with him as he sold cheese and traded sheep for corn with the Native

people at Sandia and San Felipe Pueblos. He treated them with deep respect and spoke Tiwa and Keres. He told me he was proud of our Indian blood.

Not all of our relatives agreed. One Christmas season, we all sat in the warm living room de mi abuelos. The large gas heater warmed the thick terrone walls of the beautiful old home my grandpa built. Snow was blowing softly. I sat on the right of my abuelo and rubbed his hand. Grandpa's hands were strong and calloused. He loved the firm rubbing and would open and close his hand around both my little hands in a rhythm. But what held my attention most was my uncle talking about our noble heritage and pure Spanish ancestry. He said we did not have a trace of Indian blood and truly we were the descendants of royalty. All were in agreement as he spoke authoritatively. I felt a sense of pride. Then grandpa turned to me and whispered "pueden dicer lo que querren, pero te digo que temenos Indio en la familia" (they can say what they want, but I tell you sincerely that we



have Indian blood in our family). I recall looking at him in amazement as he smiled at me. I felt intense pride as he shared this news only with me. I've always wondered from which side of my family the Native blood came from and what tribe?
I was strong-willed as a kid. My family, mostly my grandpa, corrected me with

dichos—sayings that preserve and teach cultural wisdom. Here are a few that shaped me:
One doesn't know the weight/burden the other carries on his back. During the influenza epidemic, when my grandpa's family was quarantined neighbors Don Elogio and Piedad Barela brought food and took the dishes back home to wash. That's community.
One harvest I tried to gather every last ear of corn My grandfather said, "*Leave some for others, the birds, and the poor.*"
We must be good neighbors. Good stewards. Leave a legacy.
I'm proud to say the Village was a refuge for others. Many Japanese families made it their home during WWII. I remember the Yonemotos, the Togamis, and others. They were our neighbors, part of the fabric of our Valley. This Village isn't just a place. It's a way of life. A way of being in the world. We have to cherish that. Protect the acequias. Keep them accessible, not just for irrigation, but for walking, for reflection, for community.



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