

Santa Fe 400th: Land, water and people remain 'intricately bound'

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by StaciMatlock

Staci Matlock As a boy, Herman Montoya rode his bicycle east on the dirt road from his family's home in Agua Fría village to St. Francis Cathedral School in downtown Santa Fe. He passed farm fields on his way into town and again after school as he headed the other way, delivering telegrams for Western Union. In spring, summer and fall, he helped on the family farm.

Like others in the village, the Montoyas depended on the Acequia Madre to deliver water to their fields. They grew pinto beans, corn, cucumbers, cantaloupe, hay and fruit trees. Others raised wheat and winter rye. They ran cattle on the Caja del Rio west of Santa Fe.

"We raised all our own food," said Montoya, 99.

When he was 6, or maybe 8, he began helping clean the ditch each spring. "Or getting in the way," Montoya joked recently in the Monte Vista Feed Store, the business he started decades ago. His eldest son, George, now runs the store.

Montoya raised his five children to help with the farm and cattle. One son, Michael, remembers going with his grandfather in a horse-drawn buckboard in the 1940s to deliver firewood and coal to customers. "Your hands were frozen, but we didn't complain," Michael Montoya said. "What good would it do?"

Montoya has lived through almost one-fourth of Santa Fe's official history. The city is almost unrecognizable from what he remembers as a boy. The fields are all gone, except a few like his and the nearby Community Farm. The Agua Fría Road is paved. The river he remembers as a year-round flow now carries water only off and on in the spring and summer.

But the acequia, for which he is the longtime mayordomo and a former commissioner, still brings water down to his family's fields and orchard.

The acequia has remained a constant in Santa Fe's ever evolving history — 400 years of history that is the focus of a citywide celebration in 2010.

Nature changed the Santa Fe basin landscape ever so slowly across millions of years. For six millennia, the mountains and plateau around the city provided firewood, edible plants and wild game. The river basin yielded arable land and water for farms. Humans changed the landscape, rapidly and dramatically, especially in the last two centuries.

Without the landscape, and the small river running through it, there would be no Santa Fe. Today people are trying to ensure the landscape and the river can continue sustaining the city and its diverse culture for generations ahead.

Ancient ones

Some 6,000 years ago, humans roamed the Santa Fe River basin, hunting, gathering food and raising families.

The people knew every inch of the land from the mountains to the Rio Grande. Without written language, archaeologists believe, people passed along information about the landscape through storytelling. They kept close watch on the weather, the movement of wildlife, the smallest changes in their environment.

"Archaic people had a very deep knowledge of the land and what the land would produce based on that year's climate," archaeologist Steve Post said.

Like their pueblo descendants and early Spanish colonists, the Archaic people lived off the land, according to ethnobotanist Mollie Toll, picking weedy perennials and harvesting piñon nuts.

The Archaic people endured unpredictable weather — drought, floods, heat and cold. "It was just as unpredictable then as now," Post said.

In 1000 A.D., the first modern pueblo was built on the terraces above what is now the Scottish Rite Temple on Washington Avenue and Paseo de Peralta. They built their homes of adobe made from the earth and turned nearby trees into vigas, architecture adopted later by Spanish and American settlers.

The pueblo people expanded farms and added corn to their staple crops.

In 1400, drought forced many to move. Pueblo people say some of their ancestors were still in the valley when the Spanish arrived. "Why didn't people return full time? That's the million-dollar question," Post said. "Why was it largely depopulated by the time the Spanish arrived?"

Founding a city

When Don Diego de Vargas rode the Camino Real and followed the river into Santa Fe in 1692, he found vegetation "so thick, it obscured the sky," he wrote in his journal.

The Spanish established Santa Fe in 1610 along the river less because of water and arable land than because it was a good location for an outpost from which to govern the nearby pueblos.

Water, though, was a big reason to build the Palace of the Governors where it still stands today. Springs, seeps and the Santa Fe River sustained the growing villa.

One of the first tasks was creating an irrigation ditch to carry water from the Santa Fe River to homes and fields. This hand-dug ditch — the Acequia Madre — would eventually stretch to the village of Agua Fría, six miles from the Plaza.

When the pueblos revolted against Spanish rule in 1680, they ousted the government from the palace by staging a siege and cutting off the water, according to historians.

The Spanish colonists added local fare to their diet, but also brought new garden vegetables and spices such as beets, carrots, coriander and, of course, chile. The Spanish also introduced new crops such as wheat and domesticated grapes. "They were told by the Spanish government to set up vineyards and olive groves," Toll said. "But you can't do it up here."

Wheat and wine were intensely identified with the Catholic religion, Toll said. In order to be self-sufficient, the missions needed to produce both. Wheat did thrive into the early 1900s in fields all the way to Colorado. Vineyards failed.

Corn, once thought of by the Spanish as poor man's food, had become a staple even by 1846, when Susan Shelby Magoffin arrived on the Santa Fe Trail. "On one square may be a dwelling house, a church," Magoffin wrote in her diary. "... and immediately opposite to it occupying the whole square is a cornfield, a fine ornament to a city."

Santa Fe endured a serious drought in 1695 and 1696 that may have dried up the Santa Fe River. People resorted to digging wells, according to archaeologist Cordelia "Dee Dee" Snow. But in other years, the river flowed most of the time. Near the Palace of the Governors, Snow and Post excavated what they believe were trout bones.

People living in Santa Fe as late as the 1940s remember the river flowing almost all year. By the 1950s, drought, water demands of a growing city and storage reservoirs stopped the flow.

An acequia lifeline

Every spring, the Montoyas and others along the Acequia Madre clean the ditch to keep it running, a tradition that dates back to Santa Fe's founding, perhaps earlier. Once they worried only about taking out weeds and trimming back trees. In the last couple of decades they've had to remove mountains of trash — from vending machines to beer bottles — and coax homeless people to move camps before they release the water into the ditch.

Eleanor Ortiz Bové said the Acequia Madre is one of the few unchanged things about Santa Fe in the last 400 years. "The acequia helped nourish Santa Fe from the first settlers until now," said Bové, whose ancestors came to Santa Fe with de Vargas.

The state engineer recognized the ditch's water rights as dating to "time immemorial and prior to 1680." "Without irrigation of one kind or another, Santa Fe would never have developed," said Bové's husband, ditch commissioner Phillip Bové.

A 1919 hydrographic survey of the Santa Fe River system listed 40 acequias irrigating 1,300 acres. By 1977, only four ditches were left, irrigating 42 acres of fruit trees, gardens, landscaping and the Montoyas' remaining hay fields.

There was little water for irrigating by then, anyway. Most of the Santa Fe River was impounded in reservoirs east of Santa Fe to serve the city. By 1947 the reservoirs were storing up to 4,131 acre-feet of water a year. "With this large addition to the storage capacity of the water company, the year-round flow of the river essentially stopped," Phillip Bové wrote in a history of the Acequia Madre.

Montoya, Bové and others fought Public Service Company of New Mexico for their water rights. PNM and the prior water company claimed the water rights under a permit obtained from the state engineer in the late 1800s. Acequia Cerro Gordo and Acequia Madre users took PNM and the Sangre de Cristo Water Company to court over the water rights in 1990.

State District Judge Art Encinias ruled — in record time for a water case — in favor of the acequias. Encinias noted that, "the urbanized nature of Santa Fe, the virtual disappearance of commercial agriculture in the area and the rise of public utilities as the most common source of water tends to trivialize important water rights.

"The people, the land and the water are intricately bound together and will be until Santa Fe is entirely paved over," he said.

The acequias and the city now work together under a stipulated agreement to maintain the acequias.

But the fight over water remains unfinished. All the water rights along the Santa Fe River still have not been finalized in court.

Full circle

Santa Fe's growing pains are ongoing, and the landscape around the city continues to change. The hills where Archaic people once roamed, but rarely stayed long, now sprout homes, schools and businesses. New developments are constantly under way, and residents fight to keep some out, like a project planned on the city's

northwest side. A multimillion-dollar project to divert water from the Rio Grande is under construction to supplement supplies from the Santa Fe River and city wells.

While modern Santa Feans might not want to live the nomadic life of the hunter-gatherer or work as hard as colonial people did to survive, their efforts to restore a relationship with land and water abound.

The city, the Santa Fe Watershed Association and other river advocates are working to restore flows into the Santa Fe River with more regular releases from municipal reservoirs. Youth groups and other volunteers have planted native vegetation and built rock works to reduce erosion and restore the green belt along the river all the way through the city.

The city and county have open space and trails staff collaborating to protect open land and create a network of trails where people can walk or bike.

Farming in Santa Fe faded over the 20th century, but outside the city limits agriculture hung on. And increasingly people in the city wanted to know who raised their food. The result was a burgeoning farmers market in the heart of the city.

The Santa Fe Farmers Market began in the 1960s with people selling produce out of their trucks. By 1999, the market had 170 vendors and more than 160,000 shoppers a year. Now the market has a permanent location at the Santa Fe Railyard.

Miguel Gallegos, the market's manager, said vendors are from the 15 northern counties, including Santa Fe County, but none are from within the city limits.

He said the market is averaging 10 to 12 new farmers a year. "The majority are small farms or people who have built a greenhouse," he said.

Inside the city limits, Gallegos has a home garden, as do many residents who are growing their own vegetables and herbs. At least four community gardens have started up in the last year. And in the village of Agua Fría, near Montoya's house, the historic Community Farm is hosting regular plantings and workshops for schoolchildren and families.

And chickens are still legal within city limits, as long as the roosters keep the noise down.

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Timeline

10,000-500: B.C. Cochise people cultivate crops in earliest evidence of agriculture in the Southwest.

1200-1500s: Pueblo Indians establish villages along Rio Grande.

1610: Soon after city's founding, Santa Fe settlers dig Acequia Madre irrigation ditch.

1743: French trappers reach Santa Fe.

1828: Gold is found in Ortiz Mountains.

1848: Mexican-American War ends, paving way for New Mexico to become U.S. territory in 1850.

1878: The railroad arrives and opens lands in New Mexico.

1923: Oil is discovered in state.

1947: Santa Fe River reservoirs store city water.

1963-1975: Four new dams in Rio Grande basin increase water storage.

1971: Santa Fe Farmers Market organizes after several years of informal gatherings.

1995: City of Santa Fe buys the water utility.

1998: Santa Fe County initiates open space and trails program.