

# AYER Y HOY en TAOS

Yesterday and Today in Taos County and Northern New Mexico

Spring 2019

Issue #46



## Historic Chili Line: Living In Memory

by Anna B. Crews

## La Hacienda De Don Pascual on The Rio Pueblo



by Ruth G. Fish



## Restoration of Peñas Negras Oratorio

by Corina Santistevan

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Issue No. 46

ISSN 1088-5285

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Taos County Historical Society's publication, Ayer y Hoy en Taos - Taos County and Northern New Mexico, is published semi-annually by the Historical Society.

We invite articles of a scholarly nature, as well as book reviews of recent publications pertinent to the Taos and northern New Mexico area. We are open to publishing occasional reminiscences, folklore, oral history and poetry that are of historical interest.

The Taos County Historical Society endeavors to maintain high standards of quality in AYER Y HOY, and we seek to make improvements as we go along. Readers' comments and suggestions are welcome.

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AYER Y HOY is distributed to all members of the Taos County Historical Society as a benefit of membership.

### Editor

Dave Cordova

The Taos County Historical Society is a New Mexico non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of the historical resources of Taos County and Northern New Mexico. Membership is open to any interested person, regardless of residence.

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## A Message from the TCHS President Ernestina Cordova

Dear Friends and Members,



Patience is a virtue. We have been waiting for construction to start in the old court house. We want to thank and compliment our County Commissioners for all the hard work they are doing to make sure the courthouse gets funded.

We do accept change but we also need to preserve our Taos History. We are very fortunate to be surrounded by a working board and many loyal members in our organization. We need to stay focused on the present and to proceed day by day to keep working to preserve our history.

In mid-January, we held our Board Retreat at Old Martina's Hall and set our goals for the fore-seeable future. Our annual meeting in February started our great lecture schedule for 2019. In February, Charles Randall's lecture was "Growing Up In Taos," in March, the topic, "Spanish Pueblo Revival Architecture" with Rachel Preston Prinz. In April, David Maes gave a short review of the strike at Pot Creek.

The upcoming schedule is dynamic as well. The scheduled featured speaker at the Honoree Luncheon is Estevan Rael Galvez, Ph.D., speaking on the Principal Creative Strategies 360 - "Manitos Community Memory Project." Our Honoree this year is Gustavo Victor Goler, Santero. In 1988 Victor Goler was juried into Traditional Spanish Market in Santa Fe for his high level of craftsmanship and innovative design in carving santos and since that time he received twenty-nine awards including Master Award for Lifetime Achievement. We are also acknowledging Julia Moore, editor of "Taos: A Topical History." In June, we welcome R.C. Gorman's sister and, more importantly, the daughter of the late Dr. Carl N. Gorman, presents an informative lecture on the WWII hero and Navajo Code Talker.

A Field Trip to the Las Trampas Church is scheduled for June 29<sup>th</sup> and will include a picnic and tour of the Alex Lopez Family Home. Please visit our website ([taoscountyhistoricalsociety.org/calendar](http://taoscountyhistoricalsociety.org/calendar)), for a listing of upcoming lectures.

Our preservation committee continues to work on the Duran Molino as well as the stabilization of the Talpa Torreón. We will keep you posted on its progress as it happens.

We are blessed to have a team of board members that are focused and motivated to do their best to achieve the goals and mission of the Historical Society.

*Thank you and have a wonderful summer!*

*Ernestina Cordova, President  
Taos County Historical Society*

# “HISTORIC CHILI LINE: LIVING IN MEMORY

by Anna B. Crews

At first sight, Taos County west of the Rio Grande appears to be one of most desolate and isolated areas in the state of New Mexico. Sagebrush and some evergreens cover the land. There are a few scattered settlements, some consisting of only a couple of families. At one time, Taos West was the site of several homesteads and a narrow-gauge railroad that passed through it going to Santa Fe. The homesteaders could not survive for need of water, and they eventually moved away, and the railroad was discontinued because there was so little business.

The Denver and Rio Grande Western Railroad (D&RG), running from Denver to Española, encountered many hazards. The narrow-gauge railroad had to cross the Rio Grande which is at the bottom a gorge for most of the distance from Colorado to Española. It also encountered deep canyons in the Sangre de Cristo mountains. Going up the long climbs, the D&RG often slowed to a walk.

The D&RG had planned to build all the way from Denver to Mexico City, but it finally settled for building to the mining areas in southern Colorado and to Española. It was built from Denver to Pueblo in 1872, after Congress approved its right of way through the public lands on June 8, 1872.

In 1878, Alamosa was founded as the center of operations for that part of the country and for New Mexico, and by 1880, the D&RG had reached Española. After it had been operating as far Española for some time, it took over the Texas, Santa Fe & Northern and covered about 35 miles from Española to Santa Fe. This transaction took place on January 9, 1887, and, through it, Santa Fe was linked with Denver by one railroad—The Denver and Rio Grande Western.

Near Antonito, Colorado, the D&RG entered New Mexico, throughout Taos County, it ran along the county line, descending into the gorge near Embudo. The old line ran almost parallel to present-day U.S. Highway 5 on the east side to Taos Junction where it continues toward the Rio Grande Gorge.

The D&RG, called the Chili Line because it carried chili and onions from the Española area, served Taos County in many ways while it was in operation. Freight was shipped from Denver to Santa Fe and arrived on the Chili Line long before it could have possibly arrived by any other means of transportation of the day.

The train could pull as much as 400 tons on level ground, but all it could pull out of the Rio Grande Canyon was 187 tons. Mail was also carried but the telegraph that ran along the tracks was an even faster means of communication. Sawmills at various points in the area west of the Rio Grande gave the Chili Line much business. Livestock was shipped out from the different stations in Taos County south to Santa Fe or north to southern Colorado or Denver.

Besides bringing mail and freight and shipping cattle, the D&RG received and sent passengers from Taos County stations. Some



Historic photo of the actual “Chili Line” in operation with a puller engine and a pusher to navigate the hilly terrain.

homesteaders in the Taos West arrived on the Chili Line or were partially moved by it. Another service of the Chili Line was the transportation of water to the homesteaders. The trip down the Rio Grande Gorge to get water cost more than the 25 cents that barrel of water cost.

Once Taos-bound passengers arrived at a station, they caught the stage bound for Taos. Of the arrivals in Taos an old-timer remarked, “We could hear the lashing before we could hear the stage.” The returning stage for Tres Piedras left Taos at about 2:00 a.m., “and never do old-timers tell of these trips to catch the only train to Santa Fe or north but they shiver mentally or physically.”

In Taos County, Tres Piedras was the first station. Later, the station changed from Tres Piedras to Servilleta and then to Taos Junction, also called Strong after the stationmaster. Taos County residents also caught the train at Embudo. The Taos Junction station had a hotel, the Wilton Hotel, a depot, a post office, and a store. Now, nothing remains of Taos Junction but ruins.

The D&RG was comparatively expensive to ride. For the 175-mile run from Santa Fe to Del Norte, Colorado, the fare was \$25. To ride to Durango one way, the fare was about \$10. Antonito was the overnight stopping point on this run, and a junction of the train to Durango. From Taos to Santa Fe, the fare was about \$3.50 or \$4 and one of the stops, at Embudo, included lunch. To get to the station, the stage charged about \$3.50 per person. The Chili Line wasn’t a fast train, traveling south to Santa Fe more rapidly than north, because of the steep grades. From Antonito to Española, the trip was seven or eight hours long. There was never any hurry on the Chili Line, but it was seldom late. The train ran every day except Sunday.

The D&RG usually consisted of one passenger coach, mail and baggage car, water car, freight car, engine, caboose, and sometimes a private car. The vintage was 1880.

In the passenger car, the seats were red-plush covered, later re-covered with imitation leather. Little coal oil lamps lit the car, and stoves at each end heated it. The private cars contained wicker arms chairs that weren’t fastened to the floor. The polished, nickel-plated asbestos lamps overhead added charm to the cars.

Many humorous incidents concerning the Chili Line are recalled today. At Taos Junction, the store bought piñon nuts from the homesteaders. At one time, the same man would come in just about every day with another one-hundred-pound sack of piñon. Finally, the storekeeper discovered the storage bin had a loose board in it and the man had been selling the same piñon over and over again.

The “New Mexico Daily Examiner” ran an article titled, “Dental Mishap Fails to Delay.” “Lost time and teeth seem to be of equal value to the D&RGW. As Engineer Albee was going to Santa Fe from Taos Junction, he turned his head toward the window and sneezed. (con’t on page 5)

# “LA HACIENDA DE DON PASCUAL ON THE RIO PUEBLO”

by Ruth G. Fish

La placita of Don Pascual Martinez stands on the north bank of the Rio del Pueblo, in the settlement called Ranchitos de Abajo, two miles west of Taos. Looking across the clear waters of the singing stream, one can see the old place dozing in the sun like an old man taking a siesta in his chair after dinner.

The last relics of the days of the dons that is left intact in the valley, its decadent air fills those who knew it in its glory with nostalgia. Its great house was built for abundant life, and knew it for more than one hundred thirty years.

The building was begun in 1798 and the quadrangle, as it stands today, was completed in 1818 by the family of Don Antonio Martinez y Godoy to whom the vast Martinez Grant was given by a king of Spain in 1788. Its thick adobe walls, few outside windows, the heavy wooden gates, and the look-out on the roof behind the firewalls were constructed to afford protection from Indian attacks. Now the greater part of the place is unused by the caretakers and



only memories people its empty rooms and the patio that resounded to the laughter of the generations of children who have left its walls to find their places in a different world than the old hacienda knew. Most of the houses of its time have been torn down or adjusted to the demands of modern living, but when the last Dons who lived there came to an age when she could no longer manage the place alone, it fell into kind hands and was purchased by Mrs. Desmond Ryan, nee Leona Read of Taos. Mrs. Ryan maintains the estate, although she lives abroad, because she wishes to preserve it for posterity that they may know how the families of colonial Spain conducted their homes before the period of American occupation. It is to be hoped that eventually it will be made a museum, furnished as it was in the 1800s, and adorned with the beautiful specimens of handicraft that has made New Mexico famous. No more fitting use could be found for the historic manor than to make it a treasure trove to house the valuable collections of authentic mementos of colonial days that are left in the community.

Don Pascual inherited the placita and 8,000 acres of land from his father, Don Severino Martinez. His holdings extended to the canyon of the Rio Grande and far to the north, and afforded tracts for intensive farming as well as range land for his herds of horses, mules, herds of fine cattle, and great flocks of sheep.

In the placita are fourteen rooms, guest rooms, a sala de recibo (reception room) and the space allotted to the house maids. At the rear are store rooms, grain rooms, a carpentry shop and a carriage room which housed three carriages.

A portal lines the inner court which has a well-house in the southwest corner. In the old days there was a border of flowers and vines around the portales and the main area of the patio was beaten hard as a floor and swept like the rooms of the house.

Behind the placita were the homes of the farm laborers and herders, the stables, cattle pens and chicken houses, with garden spaces, dotted with fruit trees along the sides.

Far from the cities and thickly populated sections of the country, homes like this had to be self-sustaining. Life in this combination of family domicile, handicraft center, factory, truck garden, stock farm and fortress was essentially feudal in character. Its master occupied the place of the baron and was beholden only to the governor of the province and the king of Spain, but being so far from the mother country, he was much more independent than he could have been had he lived within the monarch's range of vision.

The women of the family took no active part in the political activities of the men but ruled their placitas with firm hands, and were trained in home administration for better than the average woman of today. Their responsibilities were greater, too because they had every detail of their households to supervise and had to give thought to the planting, the harvesting and preservation of vegetables and fruits for winter use.

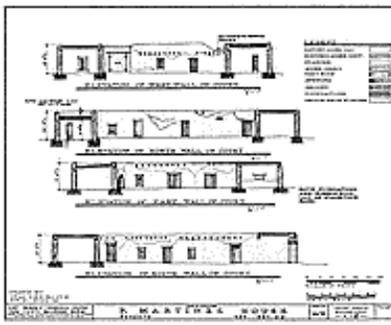
Most of this food was dried as there were no facilities for canning. The meal was ground at home. Candles

were made for light; soap had to be made; usually in huge cauldrons over open fires in the patios, where the dyestuffs were also prepared from herbs, blossoms, bark and shrubs and the household laundry done. The weaving of all woolen fabrics, stockings, mittens, scarves, sabanillos and blankets was supervised by the doña who usually did a large share of the weaving, and took pride in her work. Before they could be made, the wool for them had to be carded and spun. The cooking and sewing for the large families and staff of servants were not small tasks, and while only special dishes for fiesta and the finer finishings of special garments were done by the mistress, she knew how all of it should be done, and was responsible for planning the food and garments. The care of the young children and the sick, was, by choice, usually the doña's portion. The training of the daughters was also a part of the mother's contribution to their future welfare, although this, of course, was something that could be shared with other older female relatives who lived in the home, or the trusted servants who were pleased to instruct the girls in the manner of doing various domestic tasks. Planning for the replacement of furnishings, directing the plastering done in the spring and fall, all of the management of houses that assumed the propositions of modern institutions such as hotels and hospitals, fell to the lot of the doñas, and capable women they were. It is easy to see why many of them were matriarchial types. The challenges of daily life were enormous, and added to these were the bearing of children, and the social duties that befitted women of their station in life.

All of them were devoutly religious and planned for the observances of the feasts and fasts of the church year, attended Mass regularly and saw to it that children and servants did likewise. How they found time to read and embroider, to ride and visit, and entertain a constant stream of guests from afar, visitors of the clergy and the political figures with whom their husbands had business, is hard to determine, but they lived compensated lives and most of them reached an advanced age before they folded their hands in retirement or death.

The dons and doñas of the Martinez family lived in the manner we have described. Don Agapito and Doña Virginia were the last of the line to

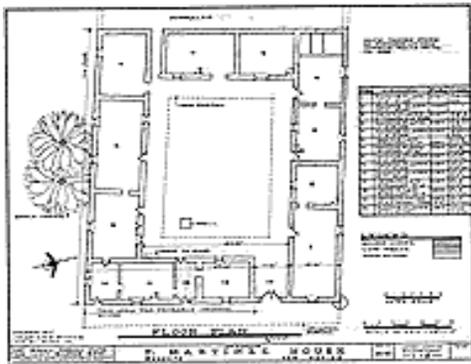
live in the placita at Ranchitos. By the time they came to the place, there were many traditions of community responsibility and hospitality established, and these they discharged with honor.



Their doors were always open to the distinguished visitors of the state and nation. Their house was well-furnished and was always supplied with many books and all the magazines and pamphlets published in the territory. The winter novenas were their choice of the church festivities to be celebrated in the home. They liked music and always had orchestras of harp, violins and guitars to liven their family reunions and fiestas. Doña Virginia had beautiful dishes, silverware, wine services and fine linens with which to serve her feasts. Their servants were Indian slaves, born on the hacienda, the descendants of Navajos who had been captured in the early colonial campaigns against the Indians and professed the Christian faith.

There were fourteen children, six of whom were (at the time of this writing) still living as was Doña Virginia, who recalled with maternal joy the days when Carlos Fedencio, Luis Pascual, Juan Manuel, Fares Elias, Ester (Mrs. Lucero) and Dora (Mrs. Armijo) were all at home, scampering through the patio or in the fields, playing the games they loved, pelota, marbles, tops, coyotito, la cabra, Monito Ciego, Iglesias or ranched as their father did, with stones of different color in their fields and on their ranges representing their cattle, goats, sheep, horses and mules. She smiled with maternal pride as she thinks of their achievements and how many of their childhood dreams they have made come true, and watched the successes of her grandchildren who are carrying on the traditions of their line.

Don Agapito's parents were Don Pascual and Doña Teodora whose story has been already recounted. Doña Virginia was born near Ranchos de Taos, and was the daughter of Captain Francisco Gonzales, who served for many years in the territorial militia and in the Civil War. He was a lawyer by profession, and a legislator who was influential in directing many of the political policies of the state. Juan Bautista La Lande, the famous French-Canadian trapper was his grandfather, and Ignacio Gonzales and Josefa La Lande, part owners of the Rio Grande grant, were his parents. He married Maria Andrea Montoya of Bernalillo at Ranchos during the Civil War, and their wedding was a brilliant military affair which was one of the most interesting social events that the community has ever known.



Doña Virginia's own wedding was at Ranchos and was also an unusual social event. Her father imported a number of Negro chefs from Santa Fe to prepare the feast and gave a grand ball to celebrate the occasion. The wedding fiesta lasted for a full week, with relatives and

friends from all parts of the state in attendance. Her gown was of white satin with long train and veil. Small wonder that with a background like this Doña Virginia longed for the customs, the manners, the splendor of the days that are gone, that halcyon period of colonial New Mexico, called the Days of the Dons.



A rusty reminder of a time so dependent on these cars for the survival of the homesteader along its route.

(con't from page 3)

His false teeth went flying out of the window. The engineer promptly stopped the train and backed it up to the vicinity of the missing teeth where the crew and some passengers searched for the teeth. When were found, the trip got underway again and the train arrived on schedule in Santa Fe. The State Corporation Commissioner, Bob Valdez, after hearing about the accident, said he would issue orders to all railroads to clear the brush next to the tracks so that detachable objects could be found more easily.

It was said, "You'll know when it's coming when you see the engineer's dog running down the track ahead of it." At one time you knew when it was coming because the whistle was stuck and it blew continuously for several days.

The Chili Line branch came to an end on September 1, 1941, when the last train made the run. The line had lasted almost 40 years. The last train consisted of three freight cars, a mail and baggage car, two passenger cars, and two private cars. The branch had closed because of ack of business.

When the tracks were dismantled, soon after the last run, the rails were sold to Japan as scrap metal. The rest of the equipment was used on the Durango branch of the D&RG. Engine #476 was then used on the scenic Silverton run. Only a few ties remain, those being at Tres Piedras where a station once was.

Northern New Mexico missed the Chili Line. The closing was opposed mostly because it had hauled chili and onions from the Española Valley. If the closing had been postponed for only a short time longer, the Chili Line could have been of much help to Northern New Mexico.

After Pearl Harbor, gasoline rationing came into effect and, if the railroad had still existed, it may have had a lot of business. When the Manhattan Project founded Los Alamos in 1943, the Chili Line could have hauled goods there.

There were many other reasons the Chili Line was missed. Many people kept their clocks set by the whistle that blew at the same times and places every day during the runs. People of Northern New Mexico had grown fond of the narrow-gauge Chili Line during the almost forty years that it had run from Antonito to Santa Fe.

This is the essay that was the grand prize winner of \$350, sponsored and published by The Taos News in 1966 on the subject of "Historic Taos West." Anna B. (Bush) Crews, then a senior at Taos High School, spent many hours, during numerous trips, researching and interviewing in preparation for the essay and the prize money helped her during her first year at the University of New Mexico.

# “FAMILY LIFE - WEST OF THE RIO GRANDE”

by Francis Cordova

Rio Grande means “large river.” In Mexico, it is called Rio Bravo del Norte. The Rio Grande is the sixth longest river in North America, and it flows for 1,885 miles through the southwestern part of the United States. For approximately 1,300 miles, or almost two-thirds of the common border, it forms the international boundary between the United States and Mexico. The Rio Grande rises on the Continental Divide in the Southern Rocky Mountains in south-western Colorado. It flows through the San Luis Valley Reclamation Project. At Alamosa, the river takes a southern course into New Mexico and flows from north to south down the state. The Rio Grande is as beautiful as the name it bears. People follow its course for enjoyment and read about it because of the many historical events that have taken place along the beautiful ribbon of water.

The beautiful Rio Grande is like a cloud floating and twisting above the river. This bridge was built to the great joy of us who love the west side of the river, for it takes us west where a little village meant so much to our family in the past.

In northern New Mexico there are several villages and towns west of the Rio Grande. Tres Piedras, which means “Three Rocks,” stands high and majestic. La Madera, Espanola, and Los Alamos, which is known for its first atomic bomb development, are also on the sunset side of the river.

My interest also lies west of the river as I write this essay. In doing research, I found that Tres Piedras was a very small village 50 years ago. It was settled by people named Gonzales, Tafoya, Rush, Hanpeter, Seward, Lewis, Nolty, and Ortiz. These people were peaceful and friendly. Most people think that the Spanish people were Dons and Doñas of noble blood. During the years around 1916, homesteading was very popular. Many, many people settled west of the Rio Grande to take advantage of the Homestead Act of 1862. It provided that any person with a family could obtain the title to 160 acres of public land if he lived on the land for five years and improved it.

In the year 1918, a covered wagon pulled by a team of tired horses; crossed the John Dunn Bridge. A family of four, the mother and three of her little ones, followed the dusty road west of the Rio Grande to the Arroyo del Aguaje very near Tres Piedras. Very sad thoughts must have crossed this dignified woman’s mind as she arrived at her destination to take up a homestead. Until 1914, she had lived in a very peaceful home and had been provided for by her husband. However, she would no longer live with the silver spoon in her mouth. Her spring days had been transformed into bitter cold ones. The woman was my grandmother, Maria Nieves Martinez.

My grandfather was dead, but he had been a “go-getter.” He was a trader by profession and lived in Latir or Sunshine Valley. There he had owned a large sawmill. He also had large flocks of sheep, goats, and a large herd of cattle. He went through the Urraca Hill and captured wild horses to

tame. He had owned the land under the Homestead Act.

Everything was fine until my grandfather decided to mortgage his land, his nice home, and his stock to get money for making improvements. However, he became very ill and died in 1914. As soon as the funeral had been held, Mr. Alex Gusdorf from Taos, who held the mortgage, ordered my grandmother and her children out of the house and off the ranch.

My grandmother had genuine pride. She was honest, energetic, and very well educated, but now she didn’t know what to do. My great-grandmother, Mrs. Juan Julian Martinez, took the family in and helped my grandmother. My grandmother, with the aid of one of her brothers, built a two-room house out of logs. There they lived until 1917 when Mr. Onecimo Torres, a very young and progressive rancher and my grandmother’s nephew, came to her rescue. He

proposed that my grandmother move to the Tres Piedras area so she could get a ranch through the Homestead Act. If she lived there for five years, she could then sell him the ranch.

Grandmother decided to take his advice, and Mr. Torres constructed a nice two room house for her and her children. She was left with only her three little ones, for there were no neighbors, no income, nothing.

The land in the arroyo was very fertile and my grandmother soon became a very efficient rancher. She planted a fine vegetable garden and milked her sister’s cows which had been left in her care. Her youngest daughter, who is my mother, took the milk, vegetables, cream cheese, and butter to the railroad station in Tres Piedras. She loved to wait for the “Chili Line” to arrive. Once it did, she would sell her goods and return with her apron pockets full of coins. In my mother’s eyes, the “Chili Line” was something great. She stood by the railway station watching the beautiful train go by. She longed to ride on it.

My grandmother never accepted charity. She and her family had various ways of earning money. Her ten-year-old son, who is my uncle, worked for Mr. Torres doing ranch work and thus assisted her in providing for the family. He was hardly seen by other members of the family because he was up at 4 a.m. and returned late at night. His salary was \$25 a month. In addition to hiring my uncle, Mr. Torres brought my grandmother large quantities of beans, potatoes, beef, and pork. Besides this, my grandmother raised a lot of chickens and sold eggs. She would also sell the beautiful hand work she made or cook for people whenever there was a wake or a wedding. The children earned their own spending money.

During the summer time it was a pleasure to live in the Arroyo, but in the winter of 1918, the days were very cold and stormy. In December, my grandmother moved to a one room house in Tres Piedras because it was too cold for the children to walk to school. She stored a lot of preserves,





Maria Nieves Martinez

jams, and dried wild spinach, squash. etc. From grease, she had made home-made soap. Consequently, her winter days were not too bad.

During 1918, when the First World War was going on, the Spanish Influenza spread all over the world. It spread through Europe and later to the Americas. The disease killed 20,000,000 people. It took its toll from Tres Piedras also. Many of my grandmother's neighbors and friends died, but my grandmother and her three little ones survived. She had made tea of chamiso, or sagebrush, everyday and forced it down their throats. She saved them from the influenza, or perhaps God saved them.

In the early summer, my grandmother cooked for the men who sheared sheep. They paid her well. While she prepared their meal, my mother entertained the men with *The Halibut Stories of the Bible*. They were surprised to hear her read and translate the stories of the Bible. My mother had an enjoyable time entertaining those funny looking men.

Just before the San Geronimo Fiesta in September, my grandmother suffered much while in the Arroyo. Many Indians of the Apache tribe were crossing the arroyo. She was terribly afraid of them because her eight year-old brother had been kidnapped by Indians in 1867 when she was four months old. At that time, Kit Carson had conquered the wandering tribes and everything seemed very peaceful. However, while Kit Carson enjoyed his last years of life at home, Indians kidnapped a child, and was never heard from again. No wonder my grandmother was frightened!

My grandmother managed to send her oldest daughter to Allison James School and her boy to El Rito School. My mother stayed with her, and grandmother finally took her for a ride on the "Chili Line." They went to Taos Junction. That was the only ride my mother ever took on a train.

At last the five years were over. My grandmother sold the land and bought a nice ranch in Arroyo Seco. She educated her family and was very active until she died at the age of 92 in 1959. However, she never forgot the five years that she spent in an arroyo west of the Rio Grande.

This essay sponsored and published by The Taos News in 1966 won "Honorable Mention."

## in memoriam

I, along with the entire TCHS Board are saddened to report on the loss of two friends and supporters of our Historical Society. Dr. Jon Young passed away as a result of a tragic fire at his residence and Julia Moore succumbed after a lengthy battle with cancer. Ms. Moore will forever be remembered as the co-editor of the Society's historical book, "Taos: A Topical History." May they rest in peace.



Ernestina Cordova  
President

## PARDON REQUESTED FOR MUTINEER IN 1885 MUTINY IN TAOS

by John Ramsay

Taos, A Topical History, has a chapter about a mutiny of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoons that occurred in the Taos Plaza in 1855. There has been a recent development that adds insight about one of the participants. Aaron D. Stevens, an enlisted member of the 1<sup>st</sup> Dragoons, verbally offended Major George Alexander Hamilton Blake near the end of the mutiny. As a consequence Stevens was court martialed and sentenced to be executed by a firing squad. The sentence was commuted to three years at Leavenworth Military Prison. By January 1856 Stevens escaped and joined the anti-slavery action in Kansas. He joined John Brown's militia and was shot at Harper's Ferry. After a trial, and still severely injured, he was hung by the State of Virginia in 1860. In 2018 a legislator from his home town of Lisbon, CT requested that the Governor of Virginia issue a pardon for Stevens. A biography of Stevens' life, *A Journey to the Gallows*, by Vic Butch and Tommy Coletti was published in 2015.



# RESTORATION OF PEÑAS NEGRAS ORATORIO - 1987-1991

by Corina Santistevan

In the spring of 1987, during the time that families begin to clean cemeteries, I began to talk to the people I met at Peñas Negras Cemetery in Los Cordova to see if there was any interest in restoring the oratorio.

The oratorio is a one-room building placed in the north-west side of the cemetery next to what is now Highway 240. The building was deteriorating fast; a crack had appeared along the north and west walls from top to bottom. The roof was caving in, the plaster had fallen off most of the outside walls and not only was the adobe exposed, but chunks of the mortar had fallen from all three walls. The building is open on the east side. Several beams and boards had rotted, and water was coming in to the inside. Graffiti appeared on the north wall. Two large plants of wild berries were growing inside the room. The rest was filled with discarded wreaths, cans, bottles, and broken boards and such.

I had also been trying to find out who might be in charge. I was repeatedly told that Juan Manuel Martinez was the last person in charge, and he had died while I was still in California. Therefore, I tried again and again to encourage Robert Martinez, his son, to take charge or to give us any books or lists that his father had. He admits his father did have a good listing all the dead, but claims he is unable to find it. I have not yet been able to obtain any other information from the Martinez family.

The first people I contacted for a meeting were Robert, Mercy Struck, and George Martinez. George is in charge of the new cemetery and when I first talked to him, he thought that perhaps the people from the new cemetery would be willing to donate money for the oratorio. Most of the people would be the same people who had their dead in Peñas Negras also. I called and called George, but nothing ever happened.

During Decoration Day I stayed at the Cemetery talking to all the people who came to decorate. Most of them were very much in favor of restoring the oratorio and one young woman, Angel Trujillo, gave me twenty dollars as her contribution right away. Most of the other people said to let them know and they would be glad to help.

The following year, I continued to work on this. Some time that year I brought the subject up at a meeting of the Taos County Historical Board. I believed that this would be a project they would be proud of to endorse. The members were enthusiastic about the project, and although no action was taken, we spent much of the time discussing what needed to be done. Some of the members offered to take a look at it before our next meeting.

When my sisters and I went to clean up my mother's and father's graves that spring, we discovered that the beautiful carved wooden trim had been taken from the front of the Oratorio. I immediately called Crime Stoppers, but was told I had to report to the police department, which I did. I also called the museums in Taos, the antique shops and Millicent Rogers called to Santa Fe to the hot line there. I also called the police department in Las Vegas and Albuquerque. I also reported the loss to the Board Members of the Historical Society at the June meeting.

I had begun to contact licensed contractors and local builders to get estimates, assessments of the situation, and possible dates when they



would be able to work on the project. I had called a meeting of the descendants sometime in February, but only Manuel Martinez had showed up. He was enthusiastic and we planned to call another meeting. This time I not only had posters, I advertised on radio, the church bulletin, and the local newspaper. At the second meeting we were able to get a committee of seven people to spearhead the project. Ruben and Feloniz Trujillo, Mercy Struck, Porfirio and Rosanita Cordova, Delfino Valerio and Corina Santistevan. We went over a very incomplete list of descendants that I had compiled, added other names that they knew and then went directly from the meeting place to the cemetery. We realized as we looked at the building that it was going to require a lot of work; that our labor force would be limited from the ranks of the descendants, most of us were older people unable to do the kind of work that would be required; and that it would require more financial assistance than I had previously thought.

I shared with them some of the estimates I had at that time and they gave me additional men to contact. The two men that I most wanted to do the work had refused the contract. Jose or Joe Arcenio Trujillo felt that it was a waste of time and recommended that it be torn down and built anew. Max Madrid, who was another man that I trusted to do the work well without a lot of supervision, also had looked at it and felt the same as Joe. He had bid, however, and had given me what I considered at the time to be a very high bid. The committee revised the list of requirements that I had previously shown the builders and suggested that we contact some licensed contractors and learn from them what they felt we needed. I had based the requirements on recommendations made by Mr. Ernest Lyckman when he and Mr. Atkins assessed our needs. The committee agreed with the recommendations but determined that we needed to get more information.

It was at this time that my spirits hit rock bottom. I felt inadequate for the position of leadership that I saw I had to take. Heretofore, I had assumed that once I had a committee that I need not do as much. I came to see that I had an even greater responsibility now. I had become aware of what little volunteer labor I might expect from the community. I knew immediately after that meeting that this project would require much more money than I had estimated, and I didn't know where it was going to come from.

Then I was informed that at the last meeting of the Taos County Historical Society Board, which I had been unable to attend, Dr. Dick had

recommended that the Historical Society hire somebody to the work and pay for it out of monies from the preservation fund. He offered to supervise the job as he had experience at the Picuris Pueblo and was building his own home. This was a blow to my dream of having the people involved in all phases of the work; assessing, planning and executing plans that we made. I had been consistent and vocal about how strongly I felt that if we were totally involved, we would be more likely to continue our interest in the future and keep up the work that we had done. I had hoped in this way to avoid what had happened after Helen Williams had so beautifully restored the oratorio in the fifties, and it was left to reach the state of deterioration which we now faced. David Caffey, who strongly supported me every step of the way, and Sadie knight, reassured me that it had been a suggestion and that no official action had been taken. I was grateful for that, but ambiguous about my feelings. At the next Board meeting I expressed my concerns, offered to withdraw from the project if they did not intend to involve the people, but explained that we needed matching funds for most grants although they would be happy to give us "hands-on" work days to help. She recommended that I call the office of Thomas Merian at the Historic Preservation Office in Santa Fe and she herself also called them.

Although I was unable to speak to Mr. Merian personally, his office sent Barbara Zook, a historical architect with much experience in this type of work. She came to Taos, inspected the building with me, and sent me a written inspection report on file. It supported Mr. Lychman's recommendations all the way. Her strongest recommendation was that we employ a licensed contractor and I had begun to feel that this would be beyond our means. I must add that it was not only a problem of money, but the job was too small to attract contractors that preferred a larger project.

Meanwhile, I had contacted Paul Ramos and he had been supportive and thought he might be able to facilitate a grant through the Millicent Rogers Foundation. At this point there was nothing definite proposed, only a possibility? I had also contacted other friends who were willing to help once the project was underway.

At the September meeting of the Historical Society Board a motion was made and carried to donate five hundred dollars for this project. When I was asked to suggest an amount, I had reluctantly used that figure, hoping that it would sound reasonable, but knowing full well that it might not even be enough to buy the materials needed. It was such a boost that for the next few weeks we were involved in frenzied activity trying to find someone to do the work before bad weather set in. I had contracted a man by the name of Luis Acosta to do the plastering of my house. I liked his work. He made a decent bid, but before he finished my house, he was called home to serious family illness and he did not return until late 1990. Family and personal illness, plus Luis' absence, made it necessary for me to put the project on the back burner. The sight of the constant deterioration of the oratorio was a source of continuous frustration and it did not help when some of our people kept asking when we were going to begin.

During this time we continued to take contractors to see the oratorio. We received technical assistance from some of them. Tim Mylet took a couple of his men and they made or proposed a plan which would use rebar to hold walls together. Rudy Vigil and Jim Barela were also contacted. Otto Pitcher recommended a Mr. Valencia from El Prado who had done his home with stabilized adobe and he came to make a bid. Mr. Lyckman had recommended Tomas Garcia and I spoke to his father who was also a builder. Other local builders were contacted, and most were not interested.

In the spring of 1981 during the novenas held for San Isidro, we began to plan again with all those people who were meeting nightly, most of whom were members of our committee. Luis Acosta had returned to Taos and I

had contracted him to do my roof. I began to price materials for the oratorio to see if five hundred dollars would cover it. I saw Paul Ramos at an Easter service and he promised to help as soon as he returned from New York in a month's time. The second week of June things just came together. Pat Houlihan was impressed with the work being done on the Ranchos Church and talked to Father Johnny Lee, asking if those people could possibly work on the oratorio too. Father explained the oratorio was not church owned, that it belonged to a community of people and suggested that he talk to me since he knew that I was working on the project. I called Paul Ramos; he and Mr. Houlihan got together. I was assured of some financial assistance. I called Luis and changed my contract with him to a contract for the oratorio and we were in business by the following Monday. Father Johnny Lee had offered his cooperation and a grant of three thousand dollars was given to us to be administered by the parish. This "seed" money made it possible for us to begin work immediately and Luis and I went to the site to estimate what material we needed right away and what we could purchase later.

#### THE CONTRACT:

I would like to share the stipulations of the contract with you.

1. Preliminary Work. Estimating what materials would be needed; for example, sand, lumber, beams, cement, wire, nails, dirt, straw, etc. We had to measure and decide how much we needed of each. It meant going to several mills to get the best prices too.

Transporting those materials that could be carried in the pick-up. Also carrying water in barrels from the river.

Bracing: The contract called for two kinds of support to be placed before any work was begun. One was to brace the beams on supports along the south wall as that was the wall that showed it had moved away from the other wall. This could be seen on the boards of the ceiling. We did not want to remove the beams and have the wall tumble down.

The other was on the wall itself from the outside. We used a 2 x 12" by 16 feet against the south wall braced by 4 strong 2 x 4 inch studs.

2. Order to repair the 4 to 6 inch crack that appeared on the south and west corner of the building, each wall was to be partially torn down and new adobes were to be used in building and tying in that corner. A foundation of rock and cement was to be used for both of these sections of wall as well as for the buttresses.
3. Two buttresses were to be built to support the walls. One on each corner- the southwest and the northwest. The two buttresses in front were to be built higher and repaired where necessary.
4. The old roof was to be removed and both boards were to be replaced with the beams I had been given by the St. Francis Parish and new boards of dry lumber. The boards were to be wide plank-like unfinished boards. There was to be an eight-inch slant to the south and two canals were to be placed on the south wall instead of the north. They were to extend away from the wall and drainage was to be made for them.

It was finished with 90-pound roofing felt, fabric-coated tar and plastic cement

5. Plastering: The old plaster was to be removed and two coats of adobe plaster was to be put on both the inside and the outside walls and the buttresses.

(The original contract did not call for placing chicken wire on the walls. But Luis felt that with the large amount of mortar or filling that was missing from the walls and all the filling-in that would have to be done; it would be wiser to put the wire both inside and

out. The committee agreed that it would add strength to the walls and so we went ahead. This is an item that I would like to reimburse Luis for as it was not in the contract. These are people who can ill afford to give two-day's work without recompense just because they feel it is the right thing to do.

Not only did these men do that without pay, but in the end, they cleared as much of the debris accumulated in the course of their work away too. This also was not included in the contract.

6. The work was to be finished in two weeks. The amount of the contract was \$1,400 dollars. It was to be paid in three installments; one at the beginning of the work; one midway through; and one at the end,

As all of you who have worked with adobe know, the form of a project is fairly simple, but the reality always turns out to be more complicated. One of our immediate problems was that the ground around the oratorio was uneven, overgrown with weeds and sagebrush, broken *cerquitos*, old crosses, wreaths, cans, bottles, cactus, etc. Water was not available. It had to be hauled from the river and later, after we were able to get permission, from the ditch. Although it was not in the contract, Luis and his men cleared off an area to put the sand, rock, and dirt.

When I ordered the sand, I found that the gravel yards, would not sell less than a full load which was far too much for our needs. Again, Luis had to use his truck, his time, and his men to haul the sand and gravel from the arroyos. I had to call around to get permission.

When we went to buy the lumber, we found that it was not available right away. Most of the lumber mills did not have the unfinished planks that we had. The old Olguin mill was the only place we could buy and then we had to place an order and wait four days.

We had a hard time finding adobe! The first three hundred that we bought turned out to be too small and we had to return them and order large ones to be made especially for us. The price doubled from forty cents an adobe to eighty cents each.

Straw became another problem. I had assumed all we had to do was go and get it. I found out you had to order at least eight days ahead of time. It was only through the kindness of the suppliers and other buyers who yielded to our needs because they were sympathetic to the project, that we were able to keep the men supplied two or three sacks at a time.

Luis has his own problems. Half-way through the project his truck broke and he was unable to get it repaired before he finished this project. He then had to use the trunk of his car to transport things. This created a problem when the dirt that I had bought from the suppliers of the Ranchos Church was dumped in my yard instead of the oratorio. I had to find and pay someone else to take it to Peñas Negras.

In the middle of the third week he broke his ankle and he had to hire others to do the work for him. This required more supervision from me as I did not know the men. They were masters at plastering and the inside of the oratorio is proof of this. The outside was just as beautiful, but our hard rains have done a bit of damage.

Some of the problems developed through no-one's fault. After all the contracted work was done, I had workdays for the people. I advertised in the Taos News, (a paid advertisement), on radio and in our church bulletin. I also asked for help from the altars of St. Francis and Los Cordova Chapel during our monthly mass.

One of our ladies decided to go on her own at a different time than we had scheduled. She did not know we had the dirt all ready. She, therefore, took her own dirt and sheepskin and proceeded to an *alis* (the finish is done with the sheepskin on the west wall and two back buttresses. We were always taught never to use an *alis* different from the plaster as most of the time the *alis* will crack. Believe me! It is true. That *alis* has cracked

into a million jigsaw pieces. At the moment I haven't decided whether to take it off before it begins to fall off or to just wait and do it afterwards. On the Saturday we scheduled a clean-up day many people showed up. Those who had said they could not help us financially but would do it with labor, and who had already contributed generously. Some came who did not even have family there. However, most of us were either too young or too old and we were unable to dig out the sagebrush or do other tasks that required greater strength.

I, therefore, had to hire some men to take out the brush and take tree truckloads to the dump.

The grant came to us with a couple of stipulations. One was that we were to replace the decorative trim that had been stolen from the oratorio and that we were to fix the fence and the gate so that the building would be a little safer.

I had learned from an old newspaper article, that Mark Romero had replaced the broken one in 1955 when Helen Williams with the assistance of Dorothy Benrimo had had the building repaired. Mark had originally used a rotting piece which was similar to the frieze found on the Leandro Martinez home in Ranchitos. I contacted Mark immediately to see if he would do the work and to see how much I had to budget for that. I agreed to the price as I was grateful that we would be able not only to replace this special trim but because it allowed me to comply with that first stipulation.

The contract with Luis called for \$1,400. The trim would cost \$700. I withdrew \$510 the very first day to pay for the first materials we needed, the adobes, the lumber, the sand, etc. That meant that I had only \$390 left to work with. It was evident that we were going to need more money. As a committee we had agreed to visit the homes of the descendants of families buried in the cemetery. We do not yet have a complete list and may not ever be able to get one. But I started out immediately with either one member or another to visit homes. Feloniz Trujillo and I went out the first evening and were able to collect one hundred and twenty dollars. The next night Mercy Struck and I went and although it was not possible to go every night, we went whenever we could, and we visited some homes two or three times.

At the beginning of the project I reported to the members of the Taos County Historical Society that we had finally started work at the oratorio. The news was received with enthusiasm. Tom Bruce made a motion that a donation be made to the oratorio Project, but was advised to go through the Preservation committee first and then bring the recommendation to the Board. Although originally the Board had voted to give a donation of five hundred dollars, this was not mentioned, and I did not know what to think. I had assumed that this donation would be honored but being a member of the Board I did not feel comfortable bringing it up. I did feel and still do that I would very much want to be able to say the Society supported this special project. No action was taken before or at the August meeting. Some of the members came on their own to see the work and contributed individually.

With a generous donation from a friend and the money we were collecting from the people, we were able to continue the work. We had to fix the fence and install a gate. The old gate was broken in pieces. We started to inspect the posts and felt we could replace all the posts that were rotted. In the beginning we tried to stretch the wire, but it too broke when the men pulled it and so we had to buy new hog wire. Then we had to pay someone to clear the sagebrush along the fence so that the men could work. We realized that if the wire in the front was too old so would the rest of it be. With the new donation we were able to go ahead and purchase the wire, staples, and barbed wire needed.

The gates became a problem. One of our members had offered to make the outside gates and gates for the building itself free of charge. Then

he broke a toe and landed in the hospital. Fortunately, Mark was with me when I was told of the accident and he offered to make the gates. I had discovered some pieces of an old *cerquito* (wooden fence around a burial) with a special design. I showed it to Mark, and he liked it. I also showed him what we wanted for the oratorio itself. He agreed to make them both. Meanwhile, I had contacted the County Commissioners to see if we could get a culvert to place at the gate entrance. They responded with a culvert which turned out to be too small so we traded it for railroad ties and they were just right. I would have liked at least one more.



I had contacted Kit Carson Electric Company and asked if they had an old telephone or rather electric pole that they could let us have enough for the sides and the top. This determined the size of our gate. They also gave us a couple of remnants which we used to make a small gateway for access to the ditch.

Two very gracious women, Lois Stewart and Lin Locke gave us access to the ditch so that we could water our iris plants in the future. Although they are selling the house, they have stipulated that this kindness be respected by future buyers.

What a documentary of good will this report has turned out to be. The generosity of the people themselves who sometimes gave until it hurts; the kindness of that special friend who made it possible to continue the work; The response from personal friends and the grace of the Power-That-Be who gave us such a beautiful day or evening to commemorate our work with blessing ceremony.

The blessing ceremony was held on August 21<sup>st</sup> because that was a date the Father Johnny Lee could be with us and he wanted very much to be a part of it. The work was not finished; I don't know that it ever will be. That west wall will have to be done again. The top of the firewall should be coated with cement to keep it from eroding so fast. Some of the broken *cerquitos* need to be repaired and placed back where they were. The whole yard needs to be cleared of piles of old debris. On the west fence we need to add the barbed wire and to do so we need to add to the posts. Drainage should be directed so that when we have those heavy rains the water does not come into the yard. The "peñas negras" which is the reason for the name of the cemetery should be found and cleared of weeds. Research is needed so that we can write a complete history of the oratorio and request that is be placed on the list of historic sites. I have ambiguous feeling about this. A friend will have the names of the families engraved on a metal plaque and placed inside the oratorio.

And next year we will have to repair whatever the rain and the snow make necessary.

## RECOLLECTIONS OF PEÑAS NEGRAS

by Dave Cordova

By way of connecting to the article about the Peñas Negras Oratorio, every funeral made use of the shelter provided by the oratorio, whether it was in hot sun or blustery weather,



I grew up knowing Peñas Negras Cemetery since it was a short walk from home and a very important part of the community.

As a child, I accompanied my grandmother and mother every Memorial Day to clean and decorate the graves of their dearly departed. My grandmother also visited the graves on anniversaries, saying prayers over the graves as an homage to their memories. There were, of course, numerous burials I attended for relatives and neighbors, which were always very somber affairs. The most memorable were the ones in the dead of winter, in the cold, in the snow, in the mud.

I didn't always know the person being interred. Back then, families attended funerals as a sign of respect, so the deceased could have been a relative or family member of a neighbor and not someone known by me. I did attend many funerals for people I knew well in life. One was for a favorite great-uncle, Ricardo Cordova, who looked forward to my visits with my father and would pull out all sorts of treats for me. He was a jolly man; I grieved for him and still remember him very fondly. Another, on a very cold, gloomy day (when I was about nine or ten), was for my great-grandmother Manuelita Anaya, and what I remember most was my mother's grief.

My mother's birth mother Rosanita Martinez, buried at Peñas Negras, died three days after giving birth to my mother. My great-grandmother Manuelita, with young children of her own, was not able to care for a baby girl, and put my mother in the care of Josefina and Benjamin Sanchez who raised her as their own child. My mother, Rosana (named for her mother) Cordova, always knew her true family, and although she loved and was grateful to Grandma Josefina, always felt a void and a longing for her own natural mother. When my mother became ill, and knowing her end was near, made her family promise to honor her wish to be cremated and her ashes buried on top of her mother's casket, that she may rest in her mother's bosom for eternity. Rosana was one of the last persons interred at Peñas Negras.

Josefina's husband Benjamin and her only natural daughter are buried at Peñas Negras. Josefina herself was only the second person interred at the newer Los Alamitos Cemetery, south of Los Cordovas. My father Porfirio and his parents, Porfirio Necomedes and Ana Maria Cordova, are also buried at Los Alamitos Cemetery.

## Lectures, Field Trips & Special Events

June 1, 2019 - Lecture  
"Carl Gorman: Navajo Code Talker"  
Zonnie Gorman  
-\*-

June 29, 2019 - Field Trip to Las Trampas Church  
and Alex Lopez Family Home & Picnic  
-\*-

August 3, 2019 - Lecture  
"Helen Blumenschein: Archaeology  
& History Advocate"  
Jeff Boyer  
-\*-

September 7, 2019 - Lecture  
"Celebrate the Legacy of El Delirio/White Sisters"  
Nancy Owen Lewis  
-\*-

Please visit our website for a complete schedule  
-\*-

First Saturday of the month at 2:00 PM  
Kit Carson Coop Meeting Room  
118 Cruz Alta Road - Taos

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## BECOME A MEMBER

We invite your participation and support through an annual membership, which includes subscriptions to "Ayer Y Hoy" and our periodic newsletters. Other activities include recordings of oral histories, maintaining archive materials and participating in community events.

### Membership categories:

Individual .....	\$20
Family .....	\$30
Sustaining .....	\$50
Business .....	\$75

To become a member sign up on our website:  
<http://taoscountyhistoricalsociety.org/members.html>  
or send a check, along with your name and address, to:

TAOS COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY  
P.O. BOX 2447 - TAOS, NM 87571

For more information call (575) 770-0681  
or e-mail: [cordova@taosnet.com](mailto:cordova@taosnet.com)



Taos County Historical Society  
PO Box 2447 i Taos, NM 87571

The Taos County Historical Society was formed in 1952 for the purpose of "...preserving the history of the Taos area." This part of New Mexico has a fascinating history, full of people, events, stories and places.

If you are interested, we invite your participation in our field trips or lecture programs, or by supporting the Society by becoming a member.