
Articles

La Cultura de la Acequia Madre: Cleaning a Community Irrigation Ditch

Jeffrey S. Smith, Matthew R. Engel, Douglas A. Hurt
Jeffery E. Roth, James M. Stevens

Throughout rural New Mexico and south-central Colorado, acequias (irrigation ditches) are the lifeblood of Hispano communities. Without the water delivered by acequias, residents would face the all but impossible task of trying to farm in the region's harsh, semiarid environment. Irrigation water is vitally important to village life. From their initial construction to the equitable distribution of water, acequias bring village residents together for a common cause. Particularly important is the annual spring cleaning. Few village events are more culturally significant than la limpia de la acequia (the cleaning of the ditch). Each year residents set aside time to help repair and maintain the village waterway. As people gather, ties between family and friends are strengthened. But more importantly, the annual event plays an invaluable role in helping to shape and sustain the local culture. Through an examination of the spring cleaning of the acequia madre (mother/main ditch) in the village of El Cerrito, New Mexico, our central objective is to articulate some of the various underlying ways cultural messages are being projected and received by local residents. Keywords: New Mexico, El Cerrito, Acequias.

As the mid-April sun slowly rises over the piñon covered hills and the shroud of frost that has covered the village begins to melt, men with shovels in hand

emerge from their warm adobe dwellings and begin to congregate among the prickly-pear cactus near the remains of the old schoolhouse. As they wait for the

mayordomo (ditchboss) to mark their presence, they heartily greet one another as if they've not seen each other in years. Once everyone has arrived, and electricity has filled the air, the platoon heads off to battle. Single file, they march three-quarters of a mile upstream to the diversion dam where the *acequia* (irrigation ditch) draws its water from the Pecos River.¹

With only a hint of the sun's warmth striking their backs, they begin squaring the sides and flattening the bottom of the ditch their forefathers dug by hand. By mid-morning, coats, hats, and sweatshirts have been discarded and the sweat-covered men have progressed halfway down the ser-

pentine-shaped ditch. While they strain their backs and extend their shoulder muscles to the limits, the women of the village periodically appear with water. The rest of their morning is spent telling stories, sharing aspirations, and lamenting losses while anticipating the mid-day feast that the women are preparing.

Each spring a similar scene is repeated in village after village throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado wherever generations of Hispanos have relied upon earthen *acequias* to water their crops. Without the water delivered by the *acequias*, residents could not farm in the semiarid environment. *Acequias* are also a key thread that holds



Figure 1: An *acequia madre* in Ortiz, Colorado. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, August 1995).

the cultural fabric of the villages together (Figure 1). From their initial construction to the equitable distribution of water, acequias bring village residents together for a common cause. More importantly, no single secular event promotes community sharing and mutual cooperation more than the annual spring cleaning of the ditch.

Over the past two decades the significance that acequias hold to the local *Nuevo Mexicano* population has received an increasing amount of attention within the literature. From bilingual children's books (LaFarge 1983) and village histories (deBuys and Harris 1990) to scholarly documentaries (Baxter 1997; Rivera 1998) and a 1990 special issue of the *Journal of the Southwest*, authors of various ilk have devoted considerable energy to exploring the role that acequias play in Hispano culture. The stellar example is Stanley Crawford's *Mayordomo: Chronicle of an Acequia in Northern New Mexico* (1988). This regional classic meticulously chronicles the passing of a year in the life of an acequia beginning and ending with the year's most significant event,

the spring cleaning.

Mixing poetic philosophy with captivating prose, Crawford admirably captures the essence of life along an acequia. Yet, missing are a number of cultural aspects that are central to the annual cleaning. This article analyzes the cleaning of a community's *acequia madre* using the village of El Cerrito, New Mexico as a case study. Our central objective is to explore the role that ditch cleaning plays in shaping the local culture. We explain that the process has a language all its own, aids in socialization, contains embedded gender roles, and holds different generational meanings.

Acequias of the Upper Rio Grande

Traditional acequias begin with a diversion dam that removes water from a river upstream from a community. At the acequia madre's source a *compuerta* (headgate) is installed to regulate the flow of water into the ditch. Typically six to twelve feet wide, the earthen structure is two to six feet deep and varies in length. *Sangrías* (lateral ditches) branch off the acequia madre and



Figure 2: *Sangrías and flooded field near Ruidoso, New Mexico. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, June 1996).*

distribute water to the individual cultivated fields (Figure 2). In some cases the sangrías are nothing more than cuts in the bank of the main ditch that allow water to flood the surface of the irrigated lands. Sidegates line the length of the sangrías allowing a set amount of water (measured in how many hours the gate is left open) to be diverted to the fields. When functioning as intended, a farmer can water five to seven acres of land per day using this method of flood irrigation (Carlson 1990).

In many Hispano villages the community ditch was so important to the success of a newly settled village that digging often started before the construction of houses, churches, and other

buildings (New Mexico State Engineer Office 1991). Without a ditch to bring the much-needed water, life in the dry environment would be impossible (Benson-Crossland 1990; Levine 1990). Early Hispano settlers dug the ditches using whatever resources were available including wooden spades and hoes and cooking knives (Hutchins 1928; Flores-Turney 1994). Excavation of the ditch followed the decline in elevation thus allowing water to flow gently through the channel. Therefore, acequias typically meander through a community and are rarely straight. One account suggests that burros were used to determine the best course for digging an acequia because the animals tend to traverse a

slope at its easiest angle. Residents would release the animals and mark their path down the grade (Flores-Turney 1994). With multiple demands placed upon their time, it usually took early settlers considerable time to dig the main irrigation ditch with some ditches taking up to twenty years to finish (New Mexico State Engineer Office 1991). Once completed, acequias required annual cleaning and maintenance.

As the mountain snows begin to melt in late March and early April, *parciantes* (landowners) whose property lies along an acequia gather for the annual '*la limpia de la acequia*' (Rivera

1998), '*la sacada de la acequia*' (Abeyta 1997), or '*la fatiga*' (Campa 1979) (the cleaning of the ditch). Determined by the number of acres owned, each *parciante* is required to provide enough *peónes* (workers) to fulfill his/her obligation to the ditch association. Work begins as *peónes* are assigned a *tarea* (an eight to twelve foot segment of the ditch) to clean as the group of men work their way down the length of the acequia. Bushes and branches are cut, fallen debris is cleared, sidebanks are chopped, and silt deposits are removed from the bottom (Figures 3 and 4). Dictated by the number of *peónes* working and



Figure 3: Cleaning El Cerrito's acequia madre. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2000).



Figure 4: Squaring the side of El Cerrito's acequia madre. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2001).

the length of the ditch, the back-breaking chore can take a few hours or a few days to complete. While the men progress to the end of the ditch, the mayordomo oversees all facets of the cleaning. He establishes workers' tar-eas, monitors their progress,

identifies areas that need special attention, and ensures the quality of the final product; everyone understands that his decisions are final.



Figure 5: Map of El Cerrito's relative location. (Cartography by Jeffrey S. Smith).

The Acequia Madre of El Cerrito

Founded in 1824 by Ramon Alarí, the village of El Cerrito sits on the southern bank of the Pecos River at an elevation of 5,650 feet (Nostrand 1992) (Figure 5). The 25-mile journey between Las Vegas and El Cerrito by automobile takes between 45-60 minutes over a deeply-rutted dirt road. After heavy rainstorms the road in and out of El Cerrito is rendered useless for at least two days. Resulting from this extreme isolation, the community has maintained much of its traditional Hispano character and has experienced little outside cultural

influences.²

During its heyday in about 1900, El Cerrito had a population of 136 people. Today only 12 families live in the village year-round, yet many absentee owners regularly return to the village to grow crops or to enjoy summer vacation homes.

Receiving an average of less than 15 inches of precipitation each year, El Cerrito residents have always been heavily dependent upon furrow and flood irrigation to water their crops. Construction of the 5,500-foot-long acequia madre began soon after the village was founded. El



Figure 6a: Map of El Cerrito, New Mexico. (Cartography by Jeffrey S. Smith).



Figure 6b: The isolated village of El Cerrito, New Mexico. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 1999).

Cerrito's main ditch begins at a rock and cement diversion dam one mile upstream from the community (Figures 6a and 6b). Soon after taking water from the Pecos River, the ditch swings away from the river to follow a less-steep grade down the river valley. Before reaching the village, the acequia clings to the base of a rock cliff 16 feet above the river. It then reaches the village whose outer edge it now defines. The ditch rejoins the Pecos River one-third of a mile downstream from the village. Prior to 1949 when the village well was dug, residents had no running water and relied upon the acequia for all domestic water use.³

In mid-March Luis Robert

Aragón, the current mayordomo, closes the headgate in preparation for the annual cleaning. As tradition and local custom dictate, on the third or fourth Saturday of April, the twenty parcientes who draw water from the ditch supply forty-two peónes for the annual spring cleaning. According to John Burns, the Ditch Association Secretary, the spring cleanings of April 1999, 2000 and 2001 attracted between sixty-five and seventy-five men. As revealed by vehicle license plates and personal interviews, the vast majority of the workers came from various locations within New Mexico (especially the Las Vegas area), but some drove from Texas, Colorado, Arizona, Oklahoma, and came from as far away

as California. One absentee owner even flew in from Alaska. Over the past two years the mile-long ditch took about five hours to clean. At midday, a two-hour break is called where workers share a potluck lunch that the women of the community have prepared. After lunch the men return to selected sections of the acequia in need of special attention. Because the El Cerrito ditch lies at the base of a north-facing bluff, the El Cerrito ditch is typically the last of the thirteen acequias to be cleaned; the ditch dries out more slowly than elsewhere in the valley. Some ditch associations start in mid-March and most complete the job by early April. Soon after the ditch has been cleaned, mayordomo Aragón reopens the compuerta and water, once again, courses through the acequia madre bringing a wellspring of life to the community.

The Culture of Cleaning an Acequia Madre

Acequias by their very nature are more than simple water carrying devices. The intense amount of labor required to clean even the simplest of ditches is far

beyond the capabilities of an individual family. One of the requirements that Spanish kings made as they apportioned new lands was that settlers must assume communal responsibility for their water sources (Campa 1979). Thus, acequia construction and maintenance has always been a shared responsibility and acequia culture demands that villagers work together to ensure an equitable and reliable supply of water (Foster 1960; Levine 1990).

This rudimentary system of irrigation, however, goes well beyond promoting mutual cooperation. As key community institutions, acequias act as an inculcating medium. As Francis Quintana so aptly points out “[I]n practice la acequia has been the core curriculum of our community culture” (Quintana 1999: 24). For generations acequias have helped shape and reinforce the upper Rio Grande’s distinct culture, yet the importance of the annual spring cleaning’s many facets has received little attention.

In the Spring of 1999, 2000 and 2001, as a group, we participated in the cleaning of El Cerri-

to's acequia madre. From the community celebration the night before to the last shovel of dirt being removed, we took part in all facets of the ditch cleaning weekend. While the women in our team helped prepare the bountiful midday meal, the men squared and flattened the earthen ditch. Throughout the process we listened to ongoing conversations and interacted with villagers. The process afforded us insight into four aspects of how cleaning a community acequia contributes to shaping the upper Rio Grande culture: 1) the language of the ditch; 2) the process of socialization; 3) the embedded gender roles; and 4) the participation of multiple generations. While the remainder of this article examines each of these four aspects individually, the role they play in promoting collective learned behavior is inextricably linked.

Language of the Ditch

El Cerrito resident Joe C' de Baca completed high school and college in nearby Las Vegas. He recalls with distaste how the teachers would punish anyone who spoke Spanish at high school. Despite the misguided

efforts of those teachers, Joe grew up bilingual. He was of the generation whose parents spoke only Spanish, yet he regularly interacted with non-Hispanics who spoke only English. Joe is proud of his linguistic abilities, yet he is concerned for today's Hispano youth who grow up unable to speak more than a few simple words of Spanish. The cleaning of El Cerrito's acequia is helping to change this situation.

English has permeated nearly every corner of the Hispano realm and today most daily transactions throughout the region are carried out in English. Despite the pervasive use of English among Hispano residents, Stanley Crawford asserts that "Spanish is the proper language of the ditch" (Crawford 1988: 43). Peppered throughout the text are abundant examples of where Spanish is used when referring to various aspects of the watercourse. In many cases the contextual meaning of the phrases would be lost if they were translated into English. We contend that Spanish is more than simply the most appropriate language of the ditch; it is a powerful force that helps shape and reinforce

local cultural traditions.

While a handful of El Cerreto's older residents continue to speak only Spanish, the vast majority of today's ditch cleaning workers speak predominantly English. It can be heard as men casually chat with their friends and family, tell jokes, or share life stories. Despite English's dominance among the workers, Spanish is unquestionably the official language of the annual spring cleaning. Spanish sets the stage for the cleaning process and is a recognizable undercurrent throughout ditch day.

As men assemble at day's break waiting for work to begin, roll call between *parciantes* and the *mayordomo* is carried out largely in Spanish. Additionally, the ditch cleaning lexicon continues to use traditional Spanish words and phrases. Workers, for example, are referred to as *peónes*; landowners as *parciantes*; sections of the ditch that *peónes* clean are called *tareas*; and the word *pala* is still used to refer to a man's shovel.

Over time many of these words could easily have been replaced with English equivalents. We submit that the reason

why Spanish words continue to be used is because cleaning the ditch is so steeped in tradition that it would be culturally disrespectful to use anything but Spanish.

One of the most striking aspects of the continued use of Spanish is when workers greet each other as they begin to congregate. Rarely does one hear anything but Spanish. Even the younger generations, who strain to utter the simplest of Castilian phrases, address each other in Spanish and then quickly revert to English as they continue their conversations. After work has begun, latecomers are also hailed and verbally teased in Spanish for sleeping too late. Spanish was the language spoken by the earliest settlers who constructed the ditches, and it continues to be used when referring to most aspects of the ditch cleaning process.

Not only are formal lexicon and greetings conducted in Spanish, but many truisms and popular sayings that relate to *la limpia* are expressed in Spanish. For example, one younger man in the community was unable to shovel dirt because of a temporary

health problem. Instead of sitting at home, he spent the day removing brush and doing less arduous work. Just prior to the midday meal a long-time resident affectionately chided the younger man for not working as hard as everyone else. He jokingly said "Solemente ellos que trabajan se permiten comer." Knowing that the younger man did not understand the saying, the older man immediately translated the saying into English ("Only those who dig the ditch are allowed to eat.")

The acequias of the upper Rio Grande have a language all their own and one that is a distinct part of the local culture. As time passes, Spanish is being forgotten and replaced by English. Our evi-

dence suggests that Spanish is still an indispensable part of the ditch cleaning experience. Even if only for a few hours, the Spanish spoken during la limpia helps to shape and reinforce the local culture. Youth who participate in the daylong event are exposed to the language of their forefathers while, simultaneously, the older generations of Hispanos who are readily able to converse in Spanish maintain and perpetuate an aspect of their distinct local cultural tradition.

A Process of Socialization

In villages throughout the upper Rio Grande basin, the annual spring cleaning is one of the few events each year that



Figure 7: Waiting to be checked in by the mayordomo. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2000).

obligate people to come together. Friends and family who do not see each other the rest of the year get reacquainted and rekindle friendships while spending time working, talking, and playing together. In El Cerrito, ditch cleaning weekend has become a combination homecoming and family reunion (Figure 7). As people interact with one another, cultural traditions are revived, beliefs are shared, and young peoples' opinions are formulated. This socialization process infuses participants with a sense of their culture.

An indispensable socializing aspect of the annual cleaning

weekend is the telling of family stories and personal testimonials. As people gather to share work and meals, stories are told and passed down through the generations. On one of our earliest visits to El Cerrito, Rick Quintana related a very personal story about why he left a well-paying job in Pueblo to live to El Cerrito. He recounted how out of touch and isolated he felt from his familial and cultural roots. Despite facing potential financial insecurity, Rick relocated to the same land that supported multiple early family generations. Not until our subsequent visit was the full meaning of his story appar-



Figure 8: Leapfrogging down El Cerrito's ditch. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2001).

ent. During our next visit Rick retold the story but this time he explained that as a troubled youth he frequently found himself on the wrong side of the law. He decided to move to El Cerrito hoping it would give his life new meaning and direction. The young man now feels more secure and happier than he ever did in the city. Much of his decision to move to El Cerrito was based on the stories he heard his father and other family members tell of life in the village.

While stories such as these are numerous, they are reminders of family origins and cultural traditions. These stories help infuse people with a sense of their culture and help shape the impressions and beliefs of youth. Without the ditch cleaning weekend the process of socialization through the telling of personal stories would be lost.

A concomitant aspect of the socialization process is that multiple generations of family members spend long hours together (Figure 8). Seldom in today's fast-paced world do grandparents, parents, and children spend extended periods of time together. As multiple generations

return to El Cerrito to share in the activities associated with cleaning the ditch, lessons are learned, beliefs are affirmed, and children become adults. Grandparents speak of life's lessons in the "old days" while younger generations reflect on how these lessons relate and give meaning to their lives. While few youth would admit to doing so, we observed them watching the middle aged and older adults for clues on how to act. By observing their elders, the younger generations witness first hand what is appropriate behavior and how to interact with others. This part of the socialization process helps to shape the youths' behavior consistent with their cultural traditions.

The ditch cleaning process is more than simply the sharing of difficult work between family, friends, and fellow villagers. The socialization process that accompanies ditch cleaning helps shape and reinforce the local culture.

Gender Roles

Most facets of cleaning a community acequia are gender specific and highly segregated spatially. The male domain is in the ditch, while, according to cul-

tural norms, women are expected to prepare the midday meal and take care of the children. These entrenched roles for gendered space have received apparently no attention in the literature.

A typical ditch cleaning day in El Cerrito begins as men meet near the remains of the old school house, check in with the mayordomo, and ready themselves to clean the ditch. Just prior to marching to the source of the acequia, a handful of women appear carrying jugs of water. With men in the lead, the group walks to the compuerta. After everyone has arrived and as tareas are assigned, the women bid words of caution and encouragement to the men and then depart. At various time intervals throughout the day women and girls appear with more containers of water. Our observations suggest that once a young girl reaches the age of fourteen to sixteen she is old enough and permitted to shuttle water to the working men. Is this a way of showcasing eligible girls to the young men of the community? Is the right to carry water seen as a girl's right of passage into womanhood? More research is needed to answer

these questions, but it is evident to us that the gendered space of acequia cleaning helps to shape and perpetuate local cultural traditions.

With the exception of carrying water, females are not encouraged to participate in the ditch cleaning process. La limpia is clearly regarded, by Hispano men and women alike, as men's work in men's space. For example, when during our 1999 visit one of our female colleagues was found cleaning a section of the acequia, one of the older men in the community lamented that "it's surely going to snow now". The implication was that bad luck would fall upon the community because a woman was working in the ditch; winter would last longer, and the growing season would be shortened. In 2001 an unidentified middle-aged Hispano woman shared another telling sentiment. During the mid-day meal she expressed sincere gratitude that women had been liberated. That is, being a woman meant she was liberated from cleaning the ditch.

Hispano women have tended to use the segregated space to their advantage. While the men



Figure 9: Preparing the midday meal. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2001).

work throughout the day cleaning the ditch, the village women prepare for and clean up after the mid-day meal (Figure 9). The fact that the men are away working ensures that the women have the village to themselves. They are thus free to share their deepest feelings in confidence and without inhibition. Shared are relationships with spouses or boyfriends, family activities, and personal concerns. One of the more intriguing exchanges is the swapping of recipes. Not only do the women exchange notes, but they discuss where the recipes came from, who first developed them, and whether the source was

a member of the family. In many regards these meetings among the women are similar to group therapy sessions where advice is offered. The wisdom possessed by the village matriarchs is shared with the younger generations as they negotiate the treacherous minefield of marriage.⁴

In today's society barriers between genders are breaking down. Over the course of our annual visits we have observed some changes in what is considered acceptable gendered behavior. A couple men have helped prepare the mid-day meal and some Hispano women have expressed considerations of

spending time shoveling dirt out of the ditch.⁵ Attitudes may be liberalizing, but our observations indicate that Hispano gender roles are still entrenched with respect to the ditch cleaning process. No Hispano women helped clean the acequia madre during any of our visits. How will society's ever-changing attitudes affect the local culture and subsequently the annual ditch cleaning?

Ditch Cleaning Among the Generations

El Cerrito men of all ages work side by side as they clean the acequia madre. Depending on an individual's age, however, each generation tends to regard the task differently. Some embrace the job with respect, others see the job as their dutiful obligation, still others regard it as a source of extra income. We discovered that as men grow older their perspective on cleaning the ditch changes.

To the oldest generation, men in their sixties or older, la limpieza de acequia is a way to participate in a key community activity. As a third, fourth, or even fifth generation family member to clean

the ditch, the process for them becomes a tangible way to maintain a link to their forefathers. While some of the older men are able to clean only a couple tareas, for them the important thing is that they are once again out in the same ditch that their father, and his father, and his father helped to clean. These men have the most reverence for the job.

For most of the middle-aged men of the village, those between the ages of thirty and sixty, cleaning the ditch holds an entirely different meaning. The ditch is seen as the device that delivers water to their croplands so they can earn a living. Without a clean, efficiently running ditch their livelihood and economic security are in jeopardy. Sharing the work experience by talking to friends and family is enjoyable, but to them the most important thing about cleaning the ditch is preparing it to carry water to their fields (Figure 10). At the same time, the working-aged men also realize that if they do not meet their work obligations, their right to remove water from the ditch is withheld. As a result, the middle-aged men do the majority of the planning and execution of the



Figure 10: *Proceeding down the ditch under the watchful eye of the mayordomo. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 1999).*

cleaning duties; they work the hardest and are the most conscientious. For example, one middle-aged man who had back surgery only weeks before typifies this generation's commitment to cleaning the ditch. Seeing him cleaning the section of ditch that ran in front of his house, he was asked why he risked injuring his back even more. He tersely replied that it was the least he could do and he did not want to be regarded as weak or unwilling to participate in the cleaning process. Men like this have assumed the most responsibility for the job.

The youngest group of men, those in their mid teens and twenties, approach the cleaning of the community ditch from a completely different perspective. For a few, the opportunity to work is seen as a right of passage into adulthood and a way to affirm their place in the community (Figure 11). They have been told throughout their adolescent lives that one day they too will be old enough to participate in *la limpia*. When that time comes they eagerly attack the job sometimes with reckless enthusiasm.

For most of the young men, however, cleaning the ditch is



Figure 11: Taking a break. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2001).

simply seen as a temporary job and source of income. The ditch holds little if any cultural meaning; rather, it simply provides them with some extra spending money. The sooner the work is done, the sooner they can get back to things that interest them. While they have an abundance of strength and energy, youth with this outlook tend to do a half-hearted job and lack focus. They need constant supervision and are frequently reminded to work more and talk less. Their work tends to be sloppy and the mayor-

domo is forced to make them fix what has been left undone or the burden falls on someone else.

Resulting from their different perspectives, each generation approaches the task of cleaning an acequia madre differently. The old and middle-aged men complain about having to do the back-breaking work, but they are glad to be able to share in the vitally important job among friends. Some, such as Joe Quintana, take great pride in being able to carry on the cleaning tradition.⁶ They tend to joke more



Figure 12: Waiting for the mayordomo's instructions. (Photo by Jeffrey S. Smith, April 2001).

and see the job as less of a chore; they put more feeling into it. The youth, on the other hand, have a wealth of energy and strength yet are the least enthusiastic. Their complaints are seldom couched in humor and they put the least effort into the task.

Over the course of a man's lifetime the attitude and demeanor with which the men approach the job changes (Figure 12). As the youth grow up and realize the importance of the task and the opportunity to work side by side with friends and family, they begin to take the job more seriously. On the other hand,

while their productivity may decline because of advancing years, the oldest men put the greatest amount of heart into the project. They are the most content to be in the ditch and it gives them great satisfaction to be able to say that they are still a part of their community's cultural traditions.

Francis Quintana may have summed up how a man's perspective on cleaning a ditch changes from youth to old age best when he wrote:

As a child I looked forward to the day when I would be accepted by the mayordomo as a

peón de la acequia. My father awaited that day, too [for] I would be one less peón he would have to hire. ... On [cleaning day] the peónes gathered at the headgate... [when] my father called out his own name I yelled, 'Aqui, Francis Quintana', and passed the mayordomo for approval. The austere mayordomo looked me over, asked me if I were old enough and whether I knew how to use the new shovel I was carrying. 'Si, señor', I responded ... 'How old were you?' the mayordomo asked my father. [After much deliberation] My father said 'About that size'. The mayordomo looked me straight in the eyes and stated deliberately, 'Your father has always been a hard worker. I am going to assume that you are like him, so I am going to approve you for now. If I see you cannot do the work as I require it, I will send you home.' I cleaned my tarea as fast and as well as I could, knowing that I was on probation. ... Fifty years later...[M]y days as a peón de la acequia are gone. I have witnessed many ... progeny become successful hombres under the conventional scrutiny of the mayordomo. (Quintana 1999: 24-25).

Conclusion

Acequias have delivered life-giving water to communities throughout the semiarid upper Rio Grande region for centuries. As a key thread in the Hispano cultural fabric, acequias have been instrumental in sustaining the local cultural traditions. No other secular cultural artifact is more laden with meaning to the resident population than acequias. As Stanley Crawford writes "the acequia is not just about water; it is about who we are, who we wish to be" (Crawford 2000: 7). Until now the cultural significance of cleaning a community's irrigation ditch has gone largely unexplored. This article has explained that many aspects associated with acequia cleaning promote collective learned behavior including the language spoken, the socialization process, the embedded gender roles, and the meaning that cleaning the ditch holds for different generations.

Mindful of the fact that considerably more work is required than can ever be paid financially, each year mayordomos in villages throughout New Mexico and southern Colorado wonder if

enough people will show up to complete the spring cleaning. Like a beacon drawing people home, families have compellingly returned to their home towns to get the job done. A primary reason is that they receive so much in emotional support and personal gain. Similar to a religious revival, participants of the annual spring cleaning experience a spiritual rebirth and are injected with a strong dose of cultural tradition. Without this annual infusion many people would feel lost and culturally malnourished. Acequias and the annual spring cleaning have thus become a source of emotional security for people.

As illustrated here, isolated villages like El Cerrito are vital to the survival of the Hispano culture. Communities such as this help to perpetuate Hispano cultural norms. By having the opportunity to return to the villages of their family's roots people are able to immerse themselves, even if only for a week-end, in their culture. It is comforting to know that despite the fast paced world beyond, there is always a place where Hispanos can go to relive aspects of their traditional culture.

Notes

1. The word acequia is believed to have been derived from the Arabic word *As-Saquiya* (meaning: water carrier) and is pronounced ah-SAY-kee-ah.
2. The first telephone line to connect El Cerrito with the outside world was laid in 1980. However, due to a break in the line, phone service was not operational until 1982.
3. One of the children's daily chores was to haul water from the acequia using empty lard buckets.
4. We want to recognize and express gratitude to Professor Mary Ann Stevens who provided the valuable information on the activities of the women in the community on ditch cleaning day.
5. Prior to our visit in 2000 women were highly discouraged, and in most cases forbidden, from working in the ditch. As indicated above, in 1999 our female colleague became a source of concern among some of the older men in the community. During our 2000 visit a handful of female students were granted permission to clean the acequia. However, the mayordomo was

compelled to make the following proclamation before work began. "This is now the year 2000. The world is changing. Some of you women are stronger than us guys and women may one day run things" (Luis Aragon 2000). In 2001 there were well over a dozen women working in the ditch. No proclamation was issued and no concerns were expressed. In fact, one long-time Hispano resident conveyed his deep gratitude for all the volunteer workers regardless of gender. 6. During our visit in 2001 Joe Quintana told us that his uncle participated in la limpia for 70 years before his death at age 84. Joe told stories of the extraordinary work his uncle performed and how difficult it was to be mayordomo in the 'old days'. It is readily apparent that Joe is proud and honored to be working in the same ditch as his uncle.

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Lead author Jeffrey S. Smith is Assistant Professor of Geography at Kansas State University. His research explores geographical patterns of culture and ethnicity in the American Southwest and northern Mexico. He can be reached at: Kansas State University; Department of Geography; 118 Seaton Hall; Manhattan, KS 66506; <jssmith7@ksu.edu>.