

From the Field

Los Hermanos Penitentes: An Illustrative Essay

Jeffrey S. Smith

When Don Juan de Oñate performed the Lenten ritual of self-flagellation in 1599 it marked the first penitent act on American soil (Campa 1979). Infamously known for their zealous acts of penance during the Easter season, *Los Hermanos Penitentes* (the Penitent brothers) have continuously provided religious guidance and social support to the remote Hispanic villages of the upper Rio Grande region for four hundred years. As pious lay brethren, the Penitentes are credited with perpetuating the Catholic faith when there was a dearth of priests; caring for the sick, poor, and elderly; and enforcing the strict moral code of behavior typically found in the communities in which they live (Chavez 1954; Horka-Follick 1969; Weigle 1976). As the intruding Anglo culture has introduced change to many of the Hispanic communities in the region,

Penitente membership has waned (Carlson 1990; Smith 1999). In some of the more remote villages where Spanish American cultural traditions prevail, however, the brotherhood remains strong.

A resounding number of scholars suggest that the Penitente brotherhood is one of the best indicators of the presence of the Spanish American culture (Woodward 1935; Tate 1967; Horka-Follick 1969; Weigle 1976). The Penitentes have played an important role in sustaining the Hispanic way of life in the upper Rio Grande region, yet few cultural geographers have explored this unique religious group. As one of the distinctive aspects of the Spanish American culture, the Penitentes provide vital services to the community in which they live, but more importantly they help define the Hispanic cultural character of the upper Rio Grande

region. This essay explores many of the unique qualities of this institution of intense faith. It is intended that by providing an historical overview and giving an account of their contemporary characteristics, long overdue light will be shed on an important cultural aspect of the upper Rio Grande region. It is also hoped that the questions posed here will stimulate further research on the Penitentes before they become simply a vestige of the past.

The exact origin of the Penitentes (officially titled *La Cofradía de Nuestro Padre Jesus Nazareno*—The Brotherhood of Our Father Jesus the Nazarene) may never be known, but Dorothy Woodward provides one of the best discussions of the various theories as to their origin. In her published Ph.D. dissertation Woodward discusses the six most plausible theories. These range from Penitente self-flagellation practices being derived from contact with Indians of the Western Hemisphere to the assertion that the Penitentes diffused from Spain as conquistadors (accompanied by priests) explored the New World (Woodward 1935).

The most commonly accepted explanation centers on the concept that Penitentes are descendants of the Third Order of Saint Francis of Assisi (Woodward 1935).

The First Order of Saint Francis was founded in 1210 and prior to his death in 1270 Francis established two more Orders. The Second Order offered nuns and pious lay women a religious outlet, while the Third Order was reserved for the laity population of the Catholic church who wanted to follow the teachings yet continue to live among the secular world (Horka-Follick 1969; Henderson 1977). This Third Order was successful both before and during the Spanish conquest of New Spain and was thus transplanted by Franciscan missionaries to the New World. As the Franciscans diffused from Central Mexico to the northern frontier (*Nuevo Mexico*), so too did the practices of the Third Order of Saint Francis. It was on the northern periphery that a change in the practices of the Third Order possibly occurred.

Since many of the remote communities of the Nuevo Mexico province were without a resident priest to perform even the most basic religious services, the local inhabitants were forced to rely upon their recollection of formal religious services. Marta Weigle concludes that a "century or more of improvisation in religious expressions, necessitated by the lack of ecclesiastics to minister in times of need, and

to celebrate the important events of the Christian year, may well have resulted in a varied conglomeration of lay practices, prayers, penances, and processions" (Weigle 1976: 51). Thus, it is understood that during this evolutionary process the Penitentes may have developed their penchant for penance.

A second commonly accepted explanation is that the Penitentes emerged from the romantic Lutheran notion that salvation is achieved only through inner faith (Walker 1991). Here it is argued that the Penitentes arose in the New Mexico province, not in the late sixteenth century as the Third Order of Saint Francis hypothesis holds, but rather in the late 1700s as a result of the migration of members of lay penitential *cofradías* from Spain via Mexico. Self-inflicted penance by religious or monastic groups to gain purification has its origins in medieval Europe. During the diffusion of the Black Plague, the practice of self-flagellation eventually spread from Germany to Spain and Portugal, where it became incorporated into festivals and religious holidays and was used by secretive brotherhoods to pay homage to their chosen saints.

While their origins may remain a mystery, the vital role and service Penitentes have provided to

their home villages is clearly understood. In 1750, an estimated 25 Franciscan Fathers served the province's 4,200 Spanish colonists and 12,700 Indians (Carlson 1990). The paucity of priests only intensified after Mexico gained its independence from Spain. In 1821 the newly formed Mexican government expelled the Spanish Catholic missionaries and replaced them with secular priests. Due to the vast territory and low population densities of the region, between 1828 and 1848 only 16 priests served the upper Rio Grande population (Nostrand 1992). This forced many villages to do without their own formal religious leader. Having proven their religious leadership through acts of penance, the Penitentes filled the vacuum. Without them, religious activities would have been nearly nonexistent; in some cases the Penitentes were the only community members who possessed a bible (McConnell-Simmons 1992). While Penitentes were active in the remote Spanish American villages where priests were absent, Alvar Carlson asserts that Penitentes were not needed and therefore did not serve the religious needs of people in Santa Fe or Albuquerque because the Catholic church was well represented there. Even after the New Mexico prov-

ince became a territory of the United States in 1848, the religious environment remained nearly the same; Bishop Jean Lamy discovered that the 65,000 residents of New Mexico were being served by a total of 16 priests (Brewer and McDowell 1990). By 1897 the Franciscans returned to the region, but most villages still went without a resident priest (Carlson 1990). Today the brotherhood continues to offer its annual Holy Week services.

Not only have the Penitentes been the spiritual leaders of the community, but throughout the year they have provided services that might otherwise have gone undone. They have cared for the sick and poor, interred the deceased, organized wakes and rosaries at funerals, assisted the widowed, and administered law and order within the village (Horka-Follick 1969; Weigle 1976; Hunter-Warren 1987; Podles and Podles 1992). Among the duties of the *Hermano Mayor* (elected Penitente leader) has been to keep watch on the morals of the village by helping to form public opinion in the area (Walker 1991). According to Jose Hernandez, although the entire community may not have been Penitente members, the resident population nonetheless was subject to Penitente rule (Jose Hernandez).

Most Penitente chapters have been found in New Mexico and southern Colorado, yet at their zenith between 1850 and 1880, the brotherhood is reported to have stretched as far north as Wyoming and Montana, to southern California and Arizona on the west, and east into Texas and Oklahoma (Weigle 1976). After numerous reports of accidental deaths and years of negative publicity by the Anglo press, the Catholic church excommunicated the Penitentes, forcing them underground. For well over five decades they continued their practices surreptitiously and by the time they were officially reinstated into the Catholic church membership had dramatically declined. "As the New Mexican folk move to the larger population centers and through education and acculturation abandon extreme forms of religious worship, the Penitentes dwindle in numbers" (Campa 1979: 210). Today the Penitente brotherhood has its strongest support in the isolated Spanish American dominated communities of northern New Mexico and southern Colorado (Smith 1999).

The Penitente brotherhood is one of the last direct links between the old world and the new. Therefore, gaining insight into the history of these intensely pious men

is part and parcel to understanding the Spanish American culture of the upper Rio Grande region. This illustrative essay has provided some images and descriptions of this unique culture group. As non-Hispanic outside cultures come to dominate much of New Mexico and southern Colorado the Spanish American way of life wanes (Carlson 1990). Today, the only pockets left where Penitentes thrive and continue to offer religious and social support are the isolated villages where outside influences are limited.



Figure 1: In 1893 Charles F. Lummis wrote that “so late as 1891 a procession of flagellants took place within the limits of the United States. A procession in which voters of this Republic shredded their naked backs with savage whips, staggered beneath huge crosses, and hugged the maddening needles of the cactus” (Lummis 1969: 56). Images like this one publicized by an unsympathetic Anglo-dominated press led to the infamous reputation of the Penitente brotherhood. Called barbaric and pornographic by misunderstanding Anglos, resident Spanish Americans regarded these pious acts as the outward expression of a man’s religious devotion. After years of pressure the Catholic Church was forced to excommunicate the Penitentes in the 1880s. This drove the brotherhood into seclusion until 1947 when they were reinstated as an official branch of the Catholic church by Archbishop Edwin V. Byren who proclaimed that the Penitentes are “a pious association of men joined in charity to commemorate the passion and death of the redeemer” (Weigle 1976). Today it is unheard of for Penitentes to engage in self-flagellating behavior; rather their devotion is sometimes expressed through fasts or prayer vigils that add meaning to their reverence for the crucified Christ. Source: adapted from photo from the George Wharton James Collection; Southwest Museum; Los Angeles in Lorayne A. Horka-Follick. 1969. *Los Hermanos Penitentes: A Vestige of Medievalism in the Southwestern United States*. Los Angeles: Westernlore Press.

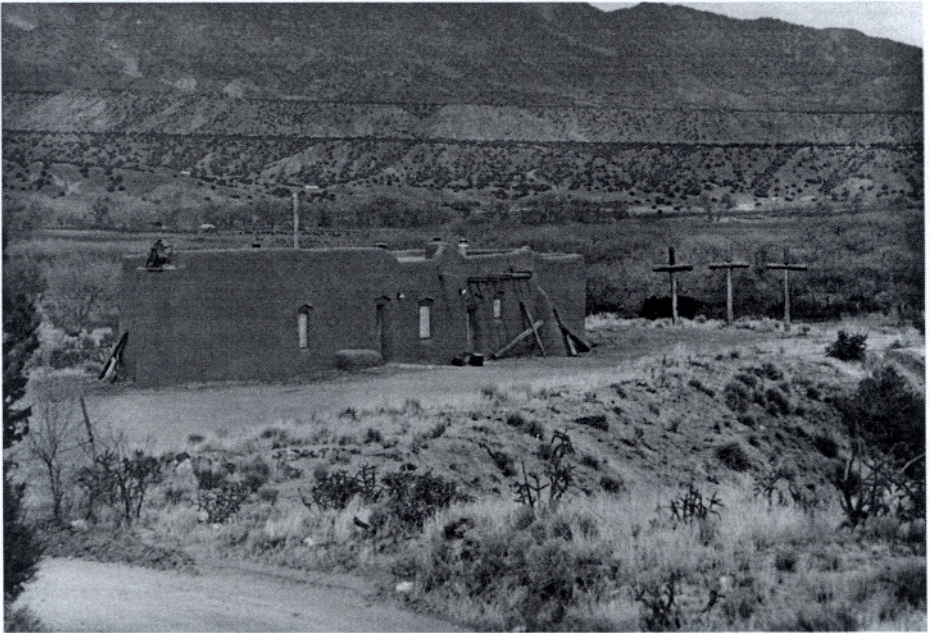


Figure 2: *The morada (worship house or meeting house) is the place around which all Penitente religious services are centered. Alvar Carlson has asserted that "[N]o building distinguished the Spanish American's vernacular landscapes more than the Penitentes' unpretentious ... (morada)" (Carlson 1990: 142-143). Bill Tate has asserted that "if it is true that architecture is the mother of the arts, best relating to nature, environment, and the purpose of the people, then the morada is the one structure in a Spanish village that fulfills these aesthetic prerequisites" (Tate 1967: 27). Simple in design, most moradas are small, single-story buildings with a pitched roof and small window. Some are "L" shaped in design, have crosses in the yard or leaning against one of the walls, and an acronym painted on the side. To the uninitiated observer the building looks like nothing more than a shed or outbuilding. Source: Photo by author, April 1998.*

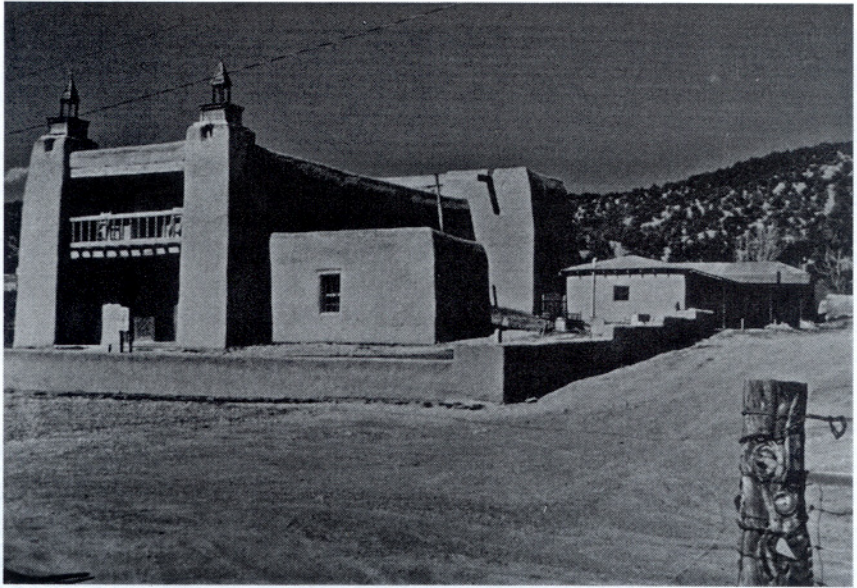


Figure 3: Due in large part to past persecution and privacy concerns, it has been asserted that most moradas tend to be located on the outskirts of Spanish American communities at varying distances from the Catholic church (Tate 1967). Furthermore, one report concludes that there is an indirect correlation between the amount of tolerance the local Catholic church has for the Penitentes and the distance the morada is from the center of the community (Carlson 1990). My fieldwork, however, has revealed no conclusive patterns as to where moradas are located within a community or their proximity to the Catholic church. Some moradas are located immediately next to the Catholic church (as is shown here in Las Trampas, New Mexico) while others are found well outside the village. The more important consideration in selecting the location of a morada tended to be the availability of land upon which the structure could be built. Further research is needed to determine if a geographic pattern exists for the distribution of moradas within Spanish American villages. Source: Photo by author, April 1998.

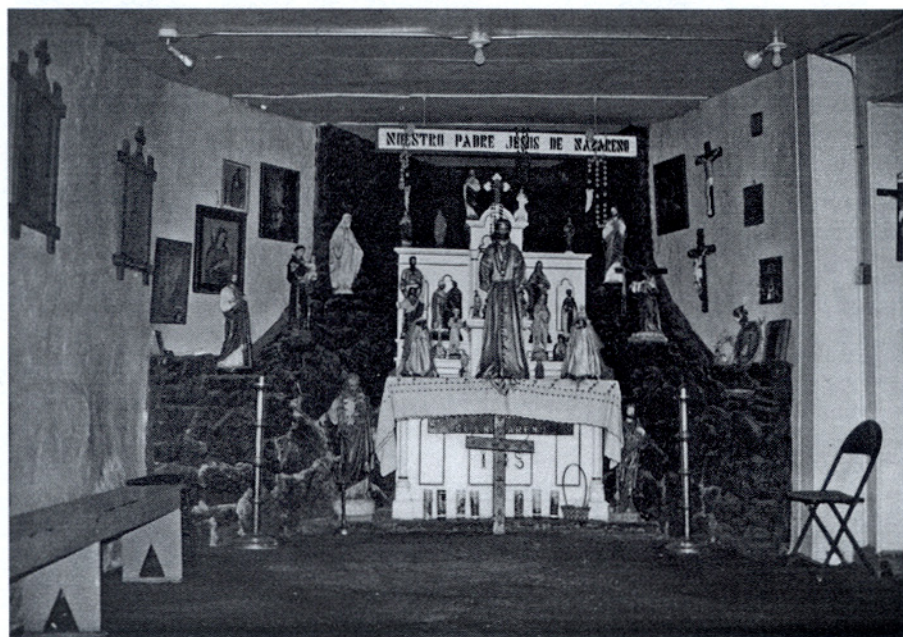


Figure 4: Like many Catholic houses of worship in the American Southwest, the inside of the typical Penitente morada is ornately decorated with bultos (folk wood carvings), retablos (paintings usually on animal skin), and images of patron saints, the holy family, and the Virgin de Guadalupe. This morada in Ojo del Gallo, New Mexico has a packed-dirt floor, pink wooden benches, pink walls, a lava altar and thick adobe walls. The sanctuary area can hold up to 65 parishioners at a Lenten service. Source: Photo by author, August 1997.



Figure 5: Each year the local brotherhood commonly offers three religious services to the community during Holy Week. On the afternoon of Good Friday the "Stations of the Cross" service is held. Commemorating the final hours of Christ's life as he dragged the heavy cross to Calvary, the Penitentes reenact each of his stops in a prayer- and song-filled service. Historically, this was the service during which the brothers performed their self-flagellating acts and mock crucifixions. Today, however, these practices are no longer followed and the service is open to all community members who wish to add meaning to the day. On Friday night the *morada* sanctuary is shrouded in black and darkness for the "Tinieblas" (from the word *Tenebrae*) service (Campa 1979). In a ceremony that reminds worshipers of Christ's final dying minutes on the cross the service includes the loud noise of shaking chains and clashing symbols, prayerful chants, and traditional religious hymns all performed in Spanish. The final service open to the public is held on Saturday morning and is called the "Gloria"—a celebration of the risen Christ. This ceremony is somewhat similar to the Easter morning service held at the local Catholic church, but is offered on Saturday instead of Sunday. At some *moradas* the Gloria service is held in conjunction with an Easter egg hunt or some other fun-filled event for the children of the community. Of the three Holy Week services, this one attracts the largest number of families within the community. Source: Photo by author, October 1999.



Figure 6: *As the Spanish explorers, Franciscan clergy, and loyal settlers headed north to present-day New Mexico, a hand-carved statue known as Nuestra Señora La Conquistadora (Our Lady the Conqueror) accompanied them. Allegedly the statue was a gift from the King of Spain and was to grace the first Franciscan chapel of the region (Martinez 1999). When the Pueblo Indians revolted in 1680 the statue retreated with the Spanish to a mission near present-day El Paso. Since returning to Santa Fe in 1692, La Conquistadora has become a principal focal point for New Mexican worshipers and for the Penitentes in particular. At some unreported time in history, the Caballeros de Vargas (Knights of Vargas) were assigned as escorts and guardians of the statue on all official religious visits. When La Conquistadora arrived for the procession of the 400th anniversary of the Penitente brotherhood (see Figures 7 and 8) many of the worshipers approached the statue where they genuflected before her, and kissed her medallion. One unidentified informant indicated that La Conquistadora is the region's most revered saint and has become the patroness of New Mexico. Source: Photo by author, October 1999.*



Figures 7 and 8: As recognized by both the Penitente brotherhood and Catholic Church, the year 1999 marked the 400th anniversary of the first penitent act in the present-day United States. The celebration was a two-part event. During Holy Week all Penitentes from New Mexico and southern Colorado were invited to participate in a special Stations of the Cross service held at La Capilla de Todos Los Santos (the Chapel of all the Saints) in San Luis, Colorado. The second part of the anniversary celebration consisted of a seven mile procession on Sunday, October 10th from the New Mexico state line to the oldest church in Colorado (Our Lady of Guadalupe in Conejos, Colorado). Leading the walk were the Caballeros de Vargas who escorted the statue of La Conquistadora with approximately 70 people following behind. Participants carried wooden crucifixes and Penitente banners,



sung traditional hymns, recited the rosary, and shared family stories. The day's event ended with a special mass offered by Bishop Arturo Tafoya of Pueblo, Colorado followed by a calf roast. Penitente chapters from various moradas in New Mexico and southern Colorado were represented. Ironically, where once the Catholic church excommunicated the brothers, they now have played a central role in commemorating the religious and social services the Penitentes have provided to the remote Spanish American villages of the upper Rio Grande region. Source: Photos by author, October 1999.

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Jeffrey S. Smith is Assistant Professor of Geography at Kansas State University. His research explores geographical patterns of attachment to place, the results of cultural interaction and change in the landscape, the symbolic meaning of the cultural landscape, diagnostic landscape features of ethnic groups, and the concept of "culture regions." His regional focus has been on the American Southwest and northern Mexico. He can be reached at: Department of Geography; Kansas State University; Dickens Hall; Manhattan, KS 66506. E-mail: <jssmith7@ksu.edu>.