

# Remembering Our Predecessors

## Preserving Historic Lands, Trails and Communities of the Taos Area

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I was finishing up my column for The Taos News when Ernie called me about giving a presentation, "Remembering Our Predecessors." For a while, I wondered what I would talk about. For me, when talking about our predecessors I usually think about the cemetery because that's where a lot of our people are. For those of us who are from here, the cemeteries are very important, and we are not taking care of them in terms of preserving historic lands. That's where the history of the villages is, and that's where the memories are. But almost everywhere you go, the cemeteries have been abandoned because we're too involved with all the new technologies--especially the young. They're always just about what's hip and what's new; and we no longer think about our predecessors, much less about heirloom varieties of seeds or the old varieties of apples.

The same is true when it comes to the environment. So I started thinking about the historic lands or trails in the communities surrounding the Taos area, and I said, "Well, I'm just going to start looking at the names of the villages." We'll start up in northern New Mexico, in northern Taos County. *Costilla*, so named

because the mountain range is shaped like a rib, or *costilla*. So then we come a little bit further south and we come to *Cerro* (hill or small peak). *Questa*, which should be spelled with a C, as in *cuesta*, means going uphill (*cuesta arriba*) but it is also going downhill, or *cuesta abajo*. In other words, you are going up the *costilla*, or ribcage. So a lot of how our ancestors named the landscape was based on the human body and the human anatomy.

Red River, which used to be known as *Río Colorado*, is the same in English and Spanish. Red River, of course, that means *Río Colorado*, so it doesn't matter whether it's in English or Spanish--it still has the same meaning.

But let's look at the other places in Taos County and how they are all tied to the landscape. Coming south we get to *Lama*. *Lama* means mud or slime or a fine sand used for mortar. Then we get to *Arroyo Hondo* and *Arroyo Seco*. An *arroyo* is officially a small stream that doesn't have water all the time. And the word *arroyo* seems to be a combination from the Arabic and from the Greek (*arroyo*, *agua corriente*, *pero no con tanto cuadal que se pueda llamar río*; *y así algunos son de parecer que a es*

### Estevan Arellano

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***"There are other concepts that are important to keep in mind when talking about the historical landscape. One is the *resolana*, which can be used as a metaphor for community education and communication, for it was in the *resolana* where people found out who died, who was getting married, when an *acequia* would be cleaned. But more important it provides a place where people can dialogue about current or historical events (Dr. Tomás Atencio has done a lot of work on this idea.)"***

*artículo árabe, y el royo se haya dicho de río, cuasi rivulus, o del verbo griego que todo viene a ser uno--from Tesoro de la Lengua Castellana o Española by Sebastián de Covarrubias Orozco, the first dictionary of the Spanish language which appeared in 1611). The a in arroyo comes from the Arab, and the royo is from the Greek. Arroyo seco, of course, means dry streambed.*

But a lot of times when I look at the *arroyos*, for me they are like veins in the human body. But we don't realize that the water is flowing undetected underneath the *arroyos*--and almost everywhere you go, you see the *arroyos* full of trash.

And I know there are some people from the BLM here, and we have been trying to get them to clean the *arroyos* ever since they stole our land grants, but they don't want to do it. They only want the land but could care less about taking care of it. Those *arroyos*, especially in the Embudo Land Grant, they're a disaster what people are doing to them. So there's no difference in you dumping all your trash in the *arroyo* or getting a syringe full of heroin and putting it into your veins. You're doing the same thing. Anytime you go and dump all the trash in the *arroyo*, you're polluting yourself, damaging yourself. So we have to be very careful with the *arroyos* because they bring the water from the high *sierras*, which feed the aquifers. Just because we don't see it doesn't

mean there is no water underneath. I'm sure that today there are a lot of people, if they were in an *arroyo*, who would probably die of thirst without realizing that there is water underneath.

There is a place named *Chupadero*. *Chupadero* means to suck up, to absorb. So if you're ever in an *arroyo* and you're dying of thirst, all you have to do is just go with your hand like this, make a bowl on the sand with your hands, and start sucking up and the water will come up. So any place that's called *chupadero* and there are several places in northern New Mexico that are called *chupaderos*, that's where the name came from, means there's water. So please don't die of thirst in a *chupadero* of all places.

Then we get to *Des Montes*. *Des Montes* comes from the Arabic word *mota*, from *desmontar*. *Mota* for a lot of people means *marijuana* or the buds of a plant. But *mota* for the Arabs referred to their weaving--to remove the *mota* from the weavings that they were doing. So that's where the word *desmontar* came from. *Desmontar* means to clear the trees or the undergrowth.

Then we keep heading south and we get to *El Prado*. A *prado* means a field, pasture, prairie or meadow (from the Latin *pratium, dijose pratium, quasi paratum, porque no se le hace ningun género de cultura y siempre está abierto y apare-*

*jado, pradera--Covarrubias).*

Then of course there is *Valdez*. But *Valdez* is one of those places that got its name when the post offices came into northern New Mexico and were named after a person, like *Pilar* in southern Taos County. *Pilar* used to be *Cieneguilla* or marshland, but it was changed and named after the wife of the first postmaster who was named *Pilar*. And *Valdez* used to be *San Antonio*. *Rodarte* is also named after the first postmaster, but the name of *Rodarte* used to be *Santa Bárbara*. So you can see that some of the villages here were also named for saints, for the spiritual connection they have.

Next we come to *Cañon*. *Cañon* means canyon, but the word *cañon* comes from the Latin word *canna*, or reed, which means that it is hollow. (*Calamus, dijose de caña, paso estrecho o garganta profunda entre dos altas montañas, por donde suelen correr los ríos--Covarrubias.*)

Then we come to *Ranchitos*. Here in northern New Mexico a *ranchito* means a small cattle ranch or livestock ranch. But really the word *ranchito* is a military term and it came from the old Spanish and means lodging for troops. It's also a military term from the Italian *raunare* meaning to bring together as one. *Ranchos de Taos* has come to mean a cattle ranch, but it really means a military garrison.

Then there is *Llano*

*Quemado*. *Llano* means (from the Latin *planus*, a, *um igual y tendido*), open space, clear. *Quemado* means burned, an open space or a cleared space that has burned. The Comanches burned the Spanish farmers out of the area so many times that they named it *Llano Quemado*.

Then we come to *Talpa*. *Talpa* is a Nahuatl word that came from Mexico. The word is *tlapa*--meaning a knob of land rising above a mesa. Another Nahuatl word that is common in northern New Mexico, especially when we are irrigating, is *tapanco*. *Tapanco* is from the Nahuatl *tlapantli*, which means a heap or a pile. So if somebody tells you "*agarra la pala y haz un tapanco* (get a shovel and go divert the water)," we are speaking in several languages. The word *pala* comes from the Hebrews and was adopted by the Romans before it became part of the Spanish language. *Acequia* is a Moorish word; *tapanco* is Nahuatl. So sometimes when we're talking, like in the sentence mentioned, we might be using words from the Nahuatl, from the Latin, from the Arab, from the Jews and Castilian; words from many languages are combined when we're talking in northern New Mexico vernacular Spanish.

Now we go across the mountain to *Peñasco*. *A peñasco* is a big, protruding boulder and comes from the Latin *pinna*. Then we come to *Vadito*.

*Vadito* or *vado* mean the same thing--a ford of a river. (*Lo ancho y somero del río donde se puede pasar*; which is from the Latin *vadum*--Covarrubias). If we continue east we get to *Tres Ritos*. Really the word *rito* means right, but what it really means here is *tres ríos*, three small creeks. But since we speak in shorthand at times, we say *ritos*. And there is also an *El Rito* up by *Cerro*, between *Cerro* and *Costilla*.

Then there's *La Junta* (junction), *Los Alamitos* (small cottonwoods--from *ulmus se dijo olmo*) and *Piedra Lumbre* (fire stone). I also forgot to mention *Ventero*. *Ventero* comes from the word *viento*--and if you know where *Ventero* is located, you know how the wind goes through there. A lot of the *Arellanos* from the *Embudo* area--I remember when I was growing up we used to go all the time up to *Ventero*--ended up there. And then there is the village of *Chamisal*. *Chamisal* means brush used as kindling wood. *El Valle* means valley from the Latin *vallis* (*un campo en la llanura, cerrado de una parte y de otro con montes*--Covarrubias). *El Valle* is one of those communities that follows the precise definition of Covarrubias. And if you know *El Valle*, it's open on one side and there is a mountain or a hill on the other side. That's what a *valle* is. *Trampas* means a trap, but it's also a French word which means to fool. Then we have *Tres Piedras*, which

means three rocks; *Tres Orejas*, three ears; and then *Ojo Sarco*. What does *ojo sarco* mean? *Ojo* means a spring, but the word *sarco* signifies meat. So more than likely, it was a place where people hunted for game: "They went to get some meat in *Ojo Sarco*. . . ." *Ojo sarco* can also sometimes mean a person or an animal with two different colored eyes. Then there's also *Ojo Caliente*, or hot springs.

Then we come to *Embudo*, where I'm from. It means funnel, but it doesn't refer to the *cerros* in *Embudo*, and a lot of people say, well, those are the *Embudo* Mountains. No, that is not true. Those are called *cerritos* or *teillas*. *Tetas* are nipples, but the nipples of a man are *teillas*. *Tetas* are the nipples of a woman. And then *Rinconada*. *Rincon* is a word that refers to something that is hidden and dark.

In English a corner is a corner whether it is on the inside or the outside, but not in Spanish. We have two words for the same concept. The inside is *el rincón*, the outside is *la esquina*. That's why in the Chicano movement there are people who say *dame esquina*--give me support. That's what the *esquina* does--it supports the house. And then in the *Embudo* Valley we have *La Bolsa*, which comes from the Latin *bursa* and usually means a pocket made of leather because it looks like a little pocket. Then we have *La Nasa* further down by the *Embudo*

Station. That means a fish trap or fish weir.

After that, there is *Cuestacitas*, like in *Questa*. I know that we had some relatives who lived in *la otra banda*. *La otra banda* is a strip of land or a border, an edge, a side ("*de la banda acá del río*"; "*de la banda de allá del monte*"; "*Del Francés vanda*"), military company. Most likely Arab in origin. As you can see, a lot of the words that we use in Spanish in northern New Mexico come from the Arab--like *acequia*, which is an irrigation canal. Almost every word with "al" has an Arab origin. Then we have *Rivera*--it's also a last name, you know, *Los Riveras*. *Rivera* or *ribera* really is the bank of the river or the riparian, *ribereño*. Then the word *maDRID*, which you always hear on TV as *MAadrid*, means water, and the reason *Madrid* got that name in Spain was because of the many *acequias* that used to surround the small city at that time. But now it's a huge metropolis. But *Madrid* means also a place that receives abundant waters (*myrit, de las numerosas acequias que se conocen, machrá [matrice en Latin] que al convertirse, en el sufijo it, en machrit, que quiere decir, "lugar que recibe abundantes aguas" para los Cristianos se convierte en Magerit; Matirce: madre de las aguas*).

And then we have *Cerro*. Like I mentioned a while ago, *cerro* is an elevated ground that

is neither a valley nor an open space but is not high enough to be a mountain (*tierra levantada, que ni es valle ni llanura, ni tampoco es tan alta que se puede decir monte; del lomo de ballo, cuando el cerro se alza, le llaman lomas--Covarrubias*). We have forgotten a lot of these words. We go through *Madrid* and through *Cerro* or *Embudo*, and we have no awareness, no relationship to where these words came from or what they mean. And if we lose these words, if we forget the Spanish or where they came from, it's like throwing away our environmental knowledge or burning it.

Every single word I mention here is related to the environment. For example, let's look at *Serna*. Is there anybody here from the *de la Serna* land grant? What does the word *serna* refer to? What's the meaning? The word *serna* is an Arab word that means *llano* or a plain or a cultivated field. But it could have come also from the Celtic, *senara*, which means a field that is worked separately.

This subject cannot really be addressed in 30 minutes, not even an hour. But let's look at a few more names. *Lucero*--the word *lucero* means morning star or splendor. So when we look at how we name the landscape, I think we're more precise in defining the environment in Spanish than in English. The way we look at the landscape is very different

than how the Anglos, for example, see it. A geologist wrote a paper in the late 1800s on this issue, saying that the Spanish saw and named the environment very differently from the English speakers. We go into a lot more detail.

For example, there is no English equivalent for *ceja* when used to define the landscape. In English, though, *ceja* means eyebrow. Then we have *cordillera*, which comes from the word *cordel*, or string, because it appears to follow the layout of a string. In English, it's simply a mountain range. In Spanish, the definitions are far more telling. Then of course we have *mesa*, or table land. From the Latin *mensa*, or *mensura*, to measure oneself when eating or drinking. But in terms of the *mercedes*, the grants of land, this word is one of the most misunderstood, because a *mesa* is very different from a *mesita*. But then when the government came in they said, "Oh, you mean, *la mesita esta ¿no?*" You know that's a little table, a *mesita*, and a *mesa* is a big table.

But that's one thing we've forgotten already, and that's why we have so much obesity in this country because when we get to the table, we forget to measure ourselves. When we forget the etymology of the words or where they came from, then we forget even why we get up to the table to eat or drink, so we get plastered. Or we like to go the restaurants

where it says, "All You Can Eat for 98 Cents." So you eat like a pig so you won't have to eat for a week.

The *arroyos* in the *Embudo* area, I can't believe now that they're not called the *arroyos*, like the *Arroyo de la mina*. You'll see the first *arroyo* as you go into what is now called Dixon (*La plaza del Embudo*) for a lot of people became known as Bob Grant's *arroyo*. When Bob Grant left the area, it became known as Jim Gilbert's *arroyo*. *Arroyo de la mina* means that a mine was there. What was referred to as the Texaco *arroyo* because there was a Texaco station there at one time was originally the *Arroyo del Pino*.

But a lot of the fault lies also with the counties and their planning departments. When they're naming the *arroyos* or the dirt roads they just go and give you a number, like the road going to my house, instead of calling it *Camino de la Junta* it's now Drive 1105. That doesn't make sense at all. That's like throwing the baby out the door with the water. You throw away all this knowledge.

And the counties are not helping at all. Instead of using the historic names when identifying roads they are simply numbering them and in the process--in 20 years--there is going to be no relation to the landscape. And if we forget the Spanish language and we don't teach it to our children we are going to lose volumes of envi-

ronmental knowledge along with it. Other common words are rapidly disappearing such as *cañada* which is a space of land between two high points. It's also a road to move livestock which is usually at least 90 *varas* (or yards) wide, whereas a *vereda* (pathway) is from 15 to 25 yards wide. We don't use the word *la cañada* much anymore.

#### **Man-made environment:**

The best example of a man-made environment is an *acequia* (as-suqiya). The *acequias* are a perfect example of an artificial environment but one that mimics nature. Our *acequia* is the *Acequia Junta y Ciénaga*, or the *acequia* of the juncture and the marsh. Why? Because it irrigates the field at the juncture of the *Río Embudo* (funnel) and the *Río Grande* and *la ciénaga*, or the marsh. I guess people really show their ignorance when they say "the *Río Grande* river," which would be the "big river river." But there are other words that are equally profound and important, such as a terrace or *terrazza*, *bancal* o *ancón*. Now let's briefly look at that anatomy of a *merced*, or grant of land. First, it has to be dissected into two parts, the irrigated or *de regadio*, and the dry land or *secano*.

Under irrigation is what is known as *suertes*, which comes from the word lottery, or stroke of luck, which is also called *chiripada*. A *suerte*, also called *extensión*, is a long lot, which has both good land and not so

good, but it gives the *vecino* (today known as neighbor but which means landowner) access to the river and also access to the commons (*del Latin, vicinus, qui, vendiendo cierta posesion suya*).

A *suerte*, especially in northern New Mexico, can be further broken down into (1) *altito*, or higher elevated piece of land--usually where the fruit trees are planted to prevent freezing and frost. Next comes the (2) *joya* (*jolla, del toscano, gioia, del verbo gioire que vale alegría, contento, cosa preciosa*--Covarrubias), which signifies jewel. In other words this is the best land and it is here where the *huertas* (Latin) and *milpas* (Nahuatl) *milli, sementera, y pa toponímico; sementera o plantacion de maíz*) are planted. A *joya* can then be further broken down and this is for water conservation into *melgas* (*mielgas*)--strips of land that are usually about 20 feet in length and the width of the field or *suerte*. A *melga* can then be broken down even further into *eras*, or small garden beds. Usually the whole of the *joya* can also be referred to as a *tabla*.

Let's not forget the *alfalfas* (another Arab word, which means forage) and the *pastizales*, or *pastos*. Then usually there will be (3) a *vega* (*campo de cultivo; campo bajo, llano y humedo a vigore, por estar siempre con vigor y fuerzas; del arabe, significa "tierra de labor puesta en llano"*--Covarrubias),

or meadow, where a few head of sheep or the milk cows were kept. By the river, one can usually find (4) the *ciénaga* (*cene-gal, lugar donde hay cieno, que es un lodo negro, hediendo y blando, que ni del todo es agua ni del todo es lodo--*

Covarrubias). But we must remember that not all *suertes* have all four types of land nowadays. And a *ciénaga* can usually be turned into agricultural land if it is drained. Draining such land is done with a *sangría*, or *sangrando la tierra*, bleeding the soil. A lot of people, including professors, say that a *sangría* is letting the water from a secondary channel to the fields but that was not the historic meaning of the term.

Some lands, especially those by the *Río Grande*, might also have *resumideros*, or quicksand, and *esteros*, which is an inlet or estuary. Now let's move above the *acequia*. Usually the plot of land above the agricultural land where the house is built is called a *solar* which can also be solar because if you look at the old houses they were all oriented to the south and hardly any of them had windows to the north. *El Valle* used to be a perfect example of this type of house construction.

The *plazas* and *plazuelas* were also built on the higher elevated lands that were non-agricultural. The commons were then broken down into (1) *montes* (*tierra alta, del Latin mono tis, tiene cabeza, espaldas*

*y faldas--Covarrubias*) or mountains, it has a head, shoulders and skirts, slope, incline; or *sierras* (*tierra montañosa y desigual, con peñasco, semejante a un peine--Covarrubias*), where people got their *vigas* and *latillas*, or where they went for herbs such as *osha de la sierra* (for there is also *osha del campo*) and *oregano*; and (2) the grazing land that was known as a *dehesa--*a word that today very few people, even the diehard land grant activists, know exists. *Cerros* and *tetillas* (referring to a man's nipple rather than a woman's) are the predominant features of the *dehesas* usually with *piñon* trees. There are also *orejas*, such as the *Tres Orejas*, on the west side of the gorge. Then there are the *lomas* (*altura pequeña y prolongada*) which are hills or mounds.

There are other concepts that are important to keep in mind when talking about the historical landscape. One is the *resolana*, which can be used as a metaphor for community education and communication, for it was in the *resolana* where people found out who died, who was getting married, when an *acequia* would be cleaned. But more important it provides a place where people can dialogue about current or historical events (Dr. Tomás Atencio has done a lot of work on this idea.)

Another concept that has fallen into disuse is the *rastrojo* which is the stubble left in the field after the harvest. During

the fall everybody opened their gates and the community livestock were allowed to eat the *rastrojo* not only to clean the land but also to provide manure for the following season. Now, don't even think of letting your livestock loose because either someone will kill your animals or they will be impounded. *Abrevadero*, or watering hole, has also fallen into oblivion because most people don't have livestock that drink water from a watering hole in the river. That's another concept whose origins lie in the Middle East. It means to hasten, like when the nomads would *abrevar*, or hasten the camels to get to a watering hole. *Abrevadero* can also be traced to the French *brevis*, which means sheep.

### **Trails and Roads**

#### **(Caminos y Veredas):**

Briefly, in closing, let me mention the roads. Probably the most famous one and the one that has been in use the most is what the Spanish named *El Camino Real de la Tierra Adentro* (The Royal Road of the Internal Provinces) which stretched all the way from Mexico City to Taos, not *Santa Fe*, though a lot of historians from both sides of the border say it ends in *Santa Fe*. Between *Embudo* and the *heradura* or horseshoe, was the *Vereda de la Apodaca*. *Apodaca* is a Basque word which means *lugar de arándanos*, or the "cranberry place." The word *camino* (from the Arab *caymum; cuasi calmino, id est,*

*callis mangus, por ser los caminos anchos; celtolat, camminus--Covarrubias). Vereda, trail (dice el dicho, "Quien deja el camino real por la vereda, piensa atajar y rodea.")*

In closing, if there are any politicians or planners in the audience, I urge you to not abandon the names our ancestors gave to the land, to the *arroyos, cañadas*. It might be more convenient and easy to simply give a number to every road. If you do, you will be responsible for erasing hundreds, if not thousands, of years of environmental history.

Also, let's not forget to preserve the historic orchards and their heirloom fruit trees, the same as preserving the *huertas* and *milpas*, but also the seeds, such as *maíz concho, chile embudueño, chile chimayoso, habas, alverjón*, as well as the techniques, such as making *orejón (la carne de melocotones y duraznos, modada de cáscara hueso, hecha longjas, seca y curada al sol por la semejanza que tiene aquel conrte con la oreja--Covarrubias)*. Above all, let's preserve our *acequias*--whose history stretches back to the Indus Valley and from there to the Middle East, the Iberian Peninsula, Mexico and finally *Nuevo México*--and the knowledge of how to maintain them. Let's not allow our *acequias* to be cemented under the guise of water conservation, unless you want for your *norias* (another Arab word, like *acequia*), to go

dry, as well as the flora and fauna who call the banks of the *acequias* home. What we need to do is map every *merced* and *acequia* so that we become aware of the vast knowledge that lies at our fingertips. If we don't document it all these histories and memories will end up in our cemeteries.

As you can see a lot of the words we use here for the landscapes, for the place names, and for everything have their origin in the Middle East, in the Iberian Peninsula, or in Mexico. A lot of the people that came with Oñate were not really Spaniards. They were Tlaxcalteca Indians. *Trampas* was settled by Tlaxcaltecas from the *Barrio Analco* in *Santa Fe*, so was *Atrisco* in Albuquerque, that's another Tlaxcalteca word. Therefore many of our words like the *cerros* and *arroyos* that are there by *Apodaca*, i.e., *Cerro de las Manzanas, Cerro Puntigudo, Arroyo Piedra Lumbre, Arroyo del Barro*, etc.,

all relate to the environment. The word *apodaca* means cranberry, and it's a Basque word, so a lot of the people who came to northern New Mexico were Basques. The Arellanos were Basques and Sephardic Jews.

I want to thank you all for being able to attend and hopefully now when you go to *Questa* or *Costilla* or other places you'll see those places differently. And instead of just going by real fast in your vehicle and saying, "Oh, there's *Questa* or *Costilla*," you'll know what those place names mean.

