

CHAPTER 9

Chimayo and Truchas

Dr. Bowen wanted me to learn all I could about New Mexico and to come to love it as much as she did. She had me read Willa Cather's *Death Comes for the Archbishop* and Harvey Fergusson's *Rio Grande* as starters. In my second week at Dixon she sent me to conduct our clinic at Truchas, a Spanish-American village located in the mountains at an elevation of 8,000 feet. As the crow flies, Truchas is not very far from Penasco, but in 1939 there was no road over the mountains between the two. We had to drive around by way of Espanola and Chimayo—a trip of more than forty miles each way. Miss Naranjo went with me as guide, helper, and interpreter, and Dr. Bowen asked her to show me the points of interest in Chimayo, her native village.

The teachers at Truchas had scheduled the clinic for 1:00 p.m. and had invited us to lunch. We stopped in Española, twenty-five miles south of Dixon, to do hospital errands which included buying groceries, ordering kerosene, and doing the hospital banking. The road to Chimayo turned off the main highway at Española and went through the beautiful Santa Cruz Valley for the ten miles to Chimayo. It was a two-lane, gravelled, well-maintained road, far different from the road Miss Zoe Ellsworth had had to use when she went to Chimayo in 1915 to teach at the mission school.

The story is told of her wild, night-time drive at breakneck speed over the twisty, muddy, almost impassable road to fetch an Española doctor for a seriously ill man in Chimayo. Zoe's sister was visiting at the time and she had taken her along on the trip. Jouncing along and being whipped from side to side in the passenger seat, she alternated advice with entreaties to slow down.

Finally Miss Zoe said, "I brought you along to pray. Now you pray and let me drive!"

Chimayo, a Spanish-American village built on the site of an Indian ruin, was a pretty little village with a river running through it. The adobe houses were neat and well-kept with painted wood trim—white, blue, pink, green, or brown. There were orchards, fields, and milk goats. The goats were a result of Miss Ellsworth's efforts. The village was progressive and much better off economically than many of its counterparts because of its active weaving industry. The Spanish friars brought weavers up from Saltillo, Mexico, to teach the people this craft. (A few years later, I visited some weavers in Saltillo and observed that the traditional designs used in Saltillo are the same as those used in Chimayo.)

I asked Miss Naranjo what Miss Ellsworth had to do with the milk goats. This is the story. She observed that the children of Chimayo did not have milk to drink. There was no pasturage for milk cows, but there were lots of goats. Miss Ellsworth had heard of drinking goat's milk and thought that that would be the answer. She arranged to buy a goat and the goat's newborn kid. She had the kid butchered and took

the nanny goat home to milk. It took all three teachers at the Chimayo Presbyterian Mission day school to accomplish this. Two held the goat while the third one attempted the milking. After almost an hour of hard work, they were lucky to have about three-quarters of a cup of milk.

A visitor from the East observed this hilarious procedure, and after he quit laughing, he told Miss Ellsworth that it takes a special breed of goat to produce milk, and he promised that when he got home, he would ship her a pair—a billy and a nanny—from a good breed of milk goat. He kept his promise, and all the milk goats in Chimayo are descended from that pair. Because of Miss Ellsworth's vision and her visitor, the children of Chimayo have had good rich goat's milk to drink for many years.

We stopped in a weaver's shop to pick up a blanket ordered by one of our nurses. I was fascinated by the very, very old wooden harness looms and by the weaving process. The looms went clackety-clack as the men weavers deftly manipulated the two foot pedals which raised or lowered the threads of the warp. With great speed they threw back and forth the heavy wooden shuttles carrying the yarn of the weft. As if by magic, a firmly woven blanket began to appear.

The average size of a blanket was about three by six feet. The usual colors of the main body were maroon, turquoise, white, orange, dark blue, gray, or green. About seven inches from each end, the weaver would put in an eight inch wide stripe made up of one half inch stripes of

the various colors. In the center, with the various colors, he made a stylized diamond with Indian influences. In the area between the stripes and big diamond, he would make small, stylized diamonds.

The jackets, purses, table, and pillow top pieces were made the same way, but in a scale suitable to the piece. Originally, the weavers had used vegetable dyed, homespun yarn. Later, they went to factory made, chemically dyed yarn. I looked at a number of beautiful blankets, rugs, jackets, and purses, but I was too poor to buy anything.



El Santuario, Chimayo

We visited two old churches on the plaza—Santo Niño de Atocha (Christ Child of Atocha) and El Santuario de Chimáyo (patroness La Senora de Esquipulas). The Santo Niño de Atocha had been remodelled and repaired and no longer looked old. Its patron saint, Santo Niño (the Christ Child), was represented by a beautiful, big doll dressed in silk and ornamented with jewels. He sat on a chair in a glass case high up on the altar. People brought him gifts of beads, baskets, artificial flowers, and little white shoes. He required many pairs of shoes because he went out at night to do good, and his shoes wore out quite fast. The people would pay the priest to have Santo Niño come to bless their homes.

Dr. Bowen told me of a man, Mr. Sanchez, who lived in Embudo and who had gone to Chimayo in his wagon to get Santo Niño to come to bless his home. The priest told Mr. Sanchez that Santo Niño would not stay unless his mother, Mary, went along. Mr. Sanchez did not want to pay for Mary, so he took Santo Niño without her. Back at Embudo, all of the neighbors came to see Santo Niño, but when they went into the room and removed the covering from the case, he was gone. Mr. Sanchez made the long trip by wagon back to Chimayo. Santo Niño was there. This time, he paid to take both Santo Niño and Mary and they both stayed in his house that night.

El Santuario, sometimes called the Church of the "Holy Mud," was a charming church located in a beautiful setting. An adobe wall surrounded the church yard, and the gateway was guarded on either side by two enormous old cottonwood

trees. A small stream rushed along just outside of the wall. The small, quaint adobe building was a mellow, faded yellow color. A wooden balcony connected its two towers. The double wood doors were very weather beaten. Inside it was cool and dark. A folk art reredos (altar screen) in brilliant blues, reds, and yellows stood behind the wooden altar. The altar itself was covered by a cream-colored cloth embellished with drawn-work embroidery of symmetrical designs. The floor was of hard-packed mud. There were no pews.

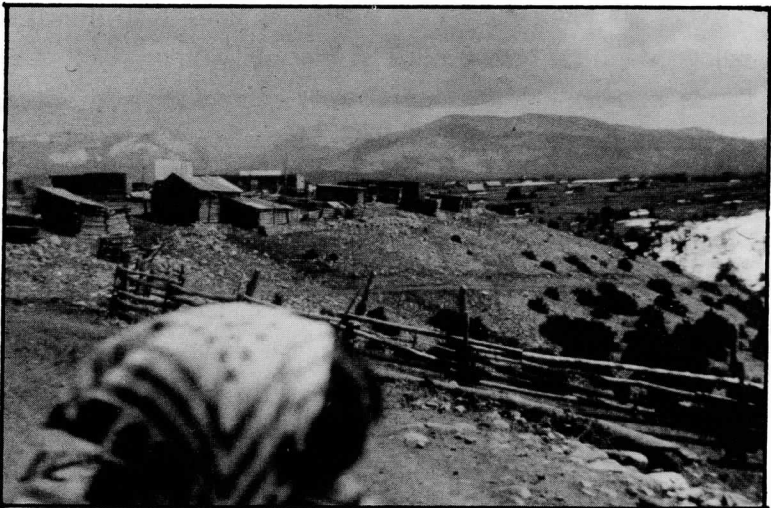
To the left of the altar a small, low doorway opened into the oldest part of the building, thought to be about 300 years old. The newer part had been built against it in 1816. The old part consisted of two rooms. In the first room, there was a shallow pit of mud believed to have curative powers. In the second room the walls were hung with crutches and braces as testimony to the healing that had occurred at the church.

This original building had been constructed over the spot where Indians, sent to cut wood, had found a wooden cross in a hollow tree. The priest interpreted this as a sign from God that this was Holy Ground and a church should be built over it. Today, devout Spanish Catholics continue to make long pilgrimages by foot to this chapel where they take a handful of mud and either rub it over their afflicted parts or put it into a little bag to be carried as a cure. Over the years, a great deal of the mud has been removed, but the pit miraculously stays full.

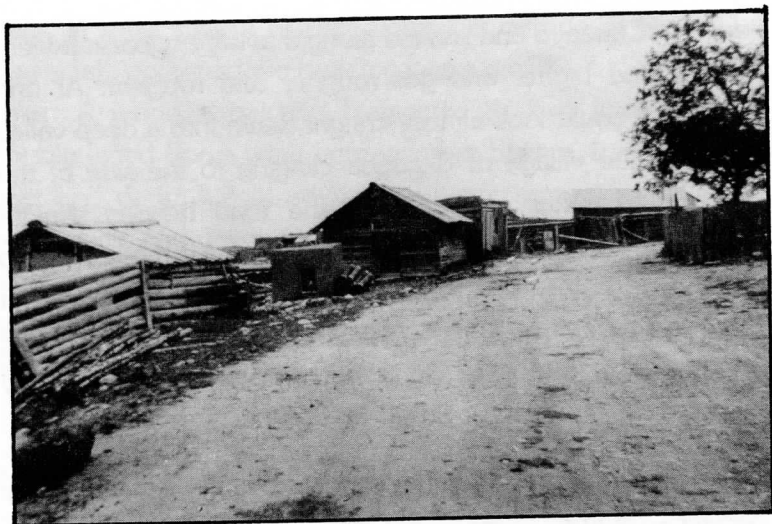
We left the churches and took the narrow road from Chimayo to Truchas. The road started climbing just at the

edge of Chimayo and snaked along a twisty hogback. It went higher and higher and got rougher and rougher. At one point, we could look almost straight down into a deep valley and see the village of Cordoba clinging to the side of the valley wall. After several miles the road headed straight toward the side of a big, high mesa. There it made a sharp right-handed turn and continued up the side of the cliff at what seemed to be a 45 degree angle. After about 600 feet of this steep climb we came out onto the narrow, twisty main street of Truchas, 2,000 feet higher than Chimayo.

Truchas was on a mesa stretching out along a deep barranca (ravine). It made me think of pictures I have seen of various Swiss villages. A short way farther, the road ended and trails began up to the 13,102 feet high Truchas Peak. Most of the buildings in Truchas were unpainted and weathered to a soft gray. Several buildings, including some houses and the morada (where the Penitentes hold their



Truchas Valley



Truchas street

secret meetings) were perched precariously on the very edge of the barranca. The Presbyterian Church, the Mission School, and the Mission teachers' house were on the other side of the road and well back from the barranca. As we arrived, we saw several burros heavily laden with firewood being driven by young boys. A few old women, with their heads and shoulders covered with a black fringed shawl, walked along the road.

The Mission teachers had expected Dr. Bowen and had prepared a very special lunch especially for her. I was soon wishing that she had been there to eat it. The main dish was very strange, and I could hardly get it down. It looked like white corn meal baked over tomatoes, shreds of corned beef, and chopped ripe olives. I later learned that it was a tamale pie, and over the years it has become one of my favorite dishes. Squash, cherry pie, and coffee completed the meal.

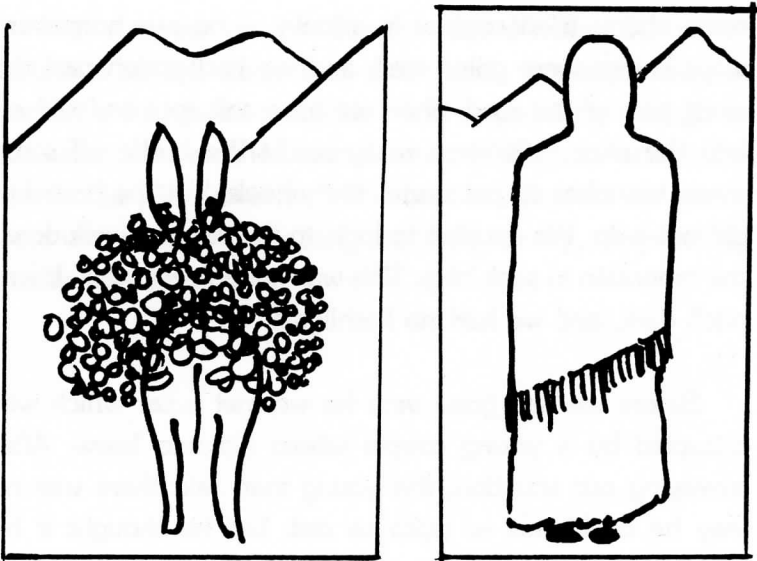


Figure 3

Truchas woman and burro

The Truchas clinic was held in the teachers' home, with a bedroom for the exam room. Miss Thompson, the head teacher, had things very well organized, and the clinic went smoothly with the patients appearing at regular intervals. Twenty-one patients came to the clinic and were examined and treated. When we finished, we went to make a house call. The home was on the other side of the barranca and about a fourth of the way up the far side. The only way to get there was by foot. The way was rough, and we had to climb over a barbed-wire fence. Miss Thompson led at a fast pace, and I, being unused to the altitude, had trouble keeping up with her. The patient was an old woman with a bad chest cold. I left medicine, but could do no more.

It was getting dark by the time we got back to our car, loaded up, and started back to Dixon. The teachers gave us

some cherry filled cookies to sustain us on our homeward way. Things were going well, and we had gotten past the worst part of the road when we hit a soft spot and slid off into the ditch. We were really stuck! We broke off some pinon branches to put under the wheels, but the branches did not help. We decided to lock up the car and walk down the mountain to seek help. This was not an easy walk. It was pitch dark, and we had no flashlights.

Before we had gone very far we met a car which was occupied by a young couple whom Naranjo knew. After surveying our situation, the young man said there was no way he could pull or push us out, but he thought if he could put on our chains we could get out on our own. That idea turned out to be very difficult and very frustrating. The jack kept sinking in the soft mud. The young man would have to stop and start over. Finally, after digging the jack out from about six inches down, we found a rock and were able to get it under the foot of the jack. At last, the first chain was finally on. By that time, about a half hour after he had started, the ground was frozen and he had to use an axe to chop out a level place for the jack. With both chains on, he was able to drive our car out of the ditch and back onto the road. He then removed our chains and we started on. We were all very cold, and he was wet and muddy but refused any money. In the course of conversation, I had found out that he not only had attended the Presbyterian Mission schools, but also had attended the University of Dubuque in Dubuque, Iowa, for two years.

We stopped at the Presbyterian Mission School in Chimayo to tell them that a Christian Endeavor rally in Santa Fe had been postponed and stayed long enough to get warm. We reached home about 10:30 p.m. and found that Lottie (God love her!) had built our fires so our rooms were warm. After such a long and arduous day, we gratefully tumbled into our beds.