CHAPTER 13

Customs, Festivals, and Feast Days— New Mexican Style

In May of 1939, electricity came to Dixon with the Rural Electrification Project. Tragedy came with it. On a wet, windy, rainy afternoon, one of the wires blew down. Two ten-year-old boys saw it and one of them grasped the wire and was immediately electrocuted. The other boy was knocked down and stunned, but managed to get up and run for help. Someone came for me. There was not a dry stick or board anywhere to be found. All we could do was to send someone to phone the electric plant and ask them to turn off the current. In the meantime, the wire continued to char his hand, and the current was sending sparks from each and every metal button. It was a sight that long lived on in my mind, and even today I can recall vividly and with great sadness that scene.

Dr. Bowen had our houses and the hospital wired. By that time, she and I had moved into a two room adobe house about half way between the hospital and the other house. Dr. Bowen's door opened on the front of the house and mine on the back. The door between the two rooms was closed. Our old telephone was installed in my room, and a small hinged door was built next to the phone. I always had to answer, but could hand the receiver through to her. We used the receiver for listening and for speaking as well.

New house of Drs. Bowen and Voorhies

Dr. Bowen's room had been the family's bedroom and mine had been the kitchen. My room had a built-in cupboard which I found very useful. Dr. Bowen got the bed bugs left by the previous occupants and I got the mice. The mice did not fare very well, for I seldom had food in my room.

The manual training class at Menaul School in Albuquerque was to make the furniture for the new staff home. Dr. Bowen had them go ahead and make the furniture for our rooms ahead of schedule so we could use it in our "new" two-room adobe house. We each had a single bed, dresser, desk, straight chair, and easy chair. The furniture was made out of pine in a southwestern style and was simple but comfortable and very nice.

In anticipation of being in larger quarters in the summer of 1939, our staff was enlarged. Bernice Ludlow came to be

office manager. Margaret Dempster and Pearl Drack, two newly graduated registered nurses, augmented the nursing staff. Miss Ludlow had light brown hair and gray eyes. She was a little taller than average and on the thin side. She was very precise about everything and always dotted every "i" and crossed every "t." She was nonplussed at our simple bookkeeping system and immediately set about to remedy it.

Miss Dempster was a slightly plump redhead with brown eyes. She was fun-loving, with a good sense of humor. Unfortunately, she did not get to stay with us very long. At the time of her graduation, she had signed many papers without reading them. Miss Drack had warned her about doing that, but Miss Dempster had not listened and soon found out that she had signed up for service in the Armed Forces. Before long she was called up. Many months later we were saddened to hear that she had died while in service before going overseas.

Miss Drack was of medium height and weight. She was blonde with flashing blue eyes. She was full of energy and enthusiasm for the work and everything pertaining to the Southwest. Both Dempster and Drack were excellent nurses and fit in perfectly with the rest of the staff.

Dr. Bowen tried to make sure that we saw all the beautiful spots and all the interesting things that were going on. One Sunday afternoon in March we drove to Taos and to the Taos Indian pueblo. Our excursions always had to be worked around the situation in the hospital. If we had a patient in labor, the doctor had to stay close by. On this

particular Sunday, we had no one in labor. It had been a quiet day and it appeared that it would stay that way. The highway went through the Rio Grande canyon. The river was full of water with the spring run-off. In some places it was rushing green and foamy over rocks. In other, wider places it looked sluggish. The mountains on the east side of the canyon were partly covered with snow and partly bare. The canyon walls which were visible were made up of many interesting formations and varicolored rocks in numerous shades of pink and red. What I thought were lots of white rocks proved to be sheep. The highway gradually ascended along the canyon wall and finally came out on a wide black mesa which it crossed. Eventually the road reached Taos and a side road led to Taos Pueblo.

Taos Pueblo was one of New Mexico's greatest tourist attractions, and we always made sure that our guests paid a visit there. It was probably the most photographed and painted of any Indian pueblo in existence, and was deserving of its fame. A beautiful swift river divided the two parts of the pueblo. Each part was built of adobe and went up in a step-wise fashion to a fifth floor level at the back (i.e., the first row of dwellings was one story, the second row two stories, and so on). Each dwelling had a door and was built like a townhouse with no space between the individual homes. Chimneys reached to the sky and vigas jutted out at many angles. An Indian man, wrapped in a traditional Pueblo Indian blanket, stood guard on top of each of the two multilevel, multifamily dwellings.

That spring, a carload of us went to Bandelier National Monument. There in Frijoles Canyon, we saw the remains of

the cliff-dwellers' homes and ancient kivas. Beneath old, big shade trees we enjoyed a picnic lunch near the Frijoles river. We wished we could stay there indefinitely. The whole area of the monument was quiet and peaceful. On the way home, we stopped at Santa Clara Indian Pueblo. As soon as we had parked under a big tree, the women came out of their houses carrying the beautiful black pottery that they make. We purchased a few medium-size pots.

All of the villages, Indian and Spanish, have patron saints and celebrate the saint's feast day with a fiesta (festival). San Juan, an Indian pueblo situated on the Rio Grande about sixteen miles south of Dixon, celebrated the feast day of its patron saint, St. John, in June. Dr. Bowen wanted all of us to see it. Of course we could not leave the hospital unattended, so we divided ourselves into groups of two or three and took turns driving down. Festivities were to include a Mass, procession, foot races, dances, and games.

I was in the first group, with Misses Maisch and Chamberlain, two of the teachers from Dixon Mission School, and one of their students. We got there in time to get seats in the church for the Mass. There was much noisy confusion as the congregation assembled. Preparations for the Mass were being finished and the candles were being lighted. The person lighting them was an old man who also had some part in the service. He looked a bit incongruous with his Indian hair style, Indian moccasins, and Anglo style suit. With all of the confusion and noise, I was surprised to see (we could not hear) the priest marrying a young Indian couple at the altar. The bride was in traditional white with a veil and all.

The Mass was in Latin and the sermon was in Spanish, so I could not understand what was being said. However, it was interesting to watch the ceremony. The priests' white robes with rich and heavy embroidery in red and gold were beautiful. Periodically during the Mass the bell was rung and someone outside fired a rifle.

After the Mass, statues of the saints were taken out in a procession around the plaza and then placed in little wooden booths so they could watch the festivities. The procession was made up of the priests, various people carrying religious banners and standards, and a group of young girls veiled and shawled in white cheesecloth.

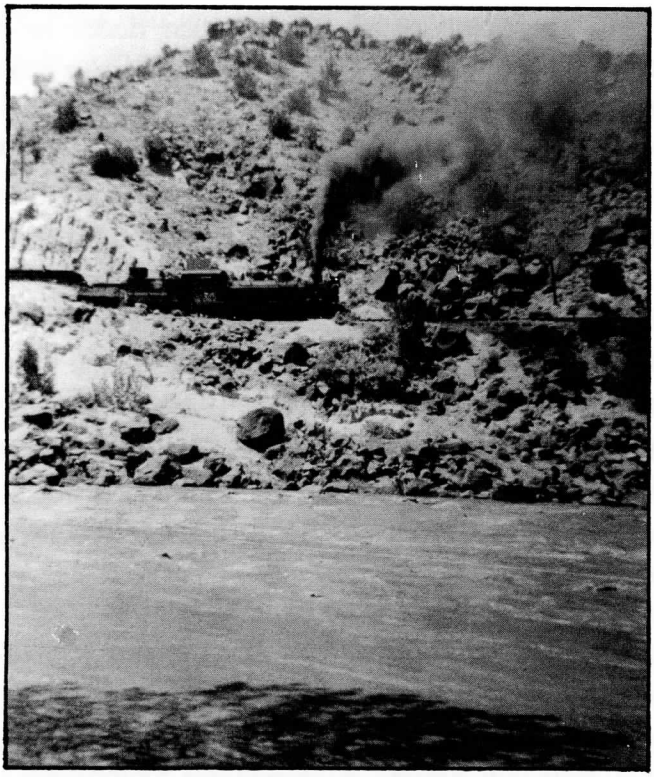
By tradition, all San Juan Indians bathed on St. John's Day and dressed in their best clothes. We saw fancy shirts, blankets, and shawls. Everyone appeared to be in fine spirits, laughing and talking as they sauntered around. There were many refreshment stands set up around the plaza selling tamales and Indian fried bread in addition to ice cream, pop, and hamburgers.

Races were supposed to follow the procession but Indians follow their own timetable. It was getting close to the time we needed to return to Dixon so the next group could come to San Juan. We delayed long enough to see the runners getting ready for the first race. They were wearing running shorts but had painted every exposed surface of their bodies in white, green, yellow, red, or blue. Some were in solid colors, each half a different one; some had stripes; some had polka dots; each wore feathers and/or pieces of fur. Before

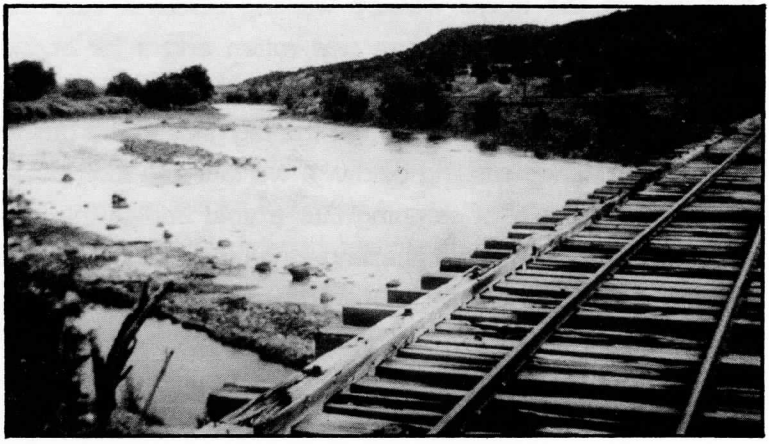
the race they participated in an Indian dance to drum accompaniment. We were sorry to leave before we had seen any races, games, or dances.

Dr. Bowen's group was the last to make the trip. Her car was in the shop in Santa Fe, and she wanted to get it that day. She did not want someone to have to drive her to Santa Fe, so she decided that her group should take the "chili train" to San Juan. She would stay on the train and continue on to Santa Fe. The chili train was the southern branch of the Denver Rio Grande narrow-gauge railroad and ran along the west side of the Rio Grande. It stopped for goats, sheep, and chickens and for anyone who flagged it down.

I got Dr. Bowen and her group to Embudo station just in time to see the train disappearing down the track. Determined to catch it, I drove very fast, and we reached Velarde station before the train. The only way to get across the river to the tracks was by walking across a very old railroad bridge. The structure was rotten and a lot of the planking was missing. Crossing it was an adventure. We were dizzy as we looked down through the big gaps in the bridge at the Rio Grande rushing below. If we failed to look down we were in danger of stepping into a void and falling into the river. In spite of these challenges, we reached the station in time to flag down the train. The group got off at San Juan. Dr. Bowen went on to Santa Fe, got her car, and returned to San Juan.



The "chili" train



Old bridge at Velarde

Dixon celebrated its Patron Saint's Day (Saint Rosa) in August, but the celebration lacked the color, interest, and excitement of St. John's Day in San Juan. Neither of these smaller fiesta days could compare with the Santa Fe Fiesta held each year on Labor Day weekend. It began on Friday evening with the burning of Zozobra, Old Man Gloom. Each year, a paper effigy more than twenty feet tall was constructed in a field north of the plaza. After sundown, with appropriate ceremonies, the effigy was ignited. As he burned, he would moan and groan and gyrate until at last he was consumed. Then, and only then, could the fiesta activities begin.

Several big dances were held during the Santa Fe Fiesta. Hundreds of people, most of them in costumes, milled around the plaza. Western, Mexican, and Spanish attire predominated. Some of the women wore denim skirts, cowboy boots, and hats, with an Indian silver belt and a western style shirt. These had pointed yokes and breast-patch pockets with a pointed flap held down with a pearl button.

Some women were in Santa Fe-style fiesta dresses. These consisted of an extremely full skirt, gathered on to a waistband and trimmed with many rows of braid and rickrack in contrasting colors and a blouse usually of the same color as the skirt and trimmed in the same way.

Some women opted for Mexican style and wore the Tijuana ensemble of red full skirt and white blouse or the China Poblana costume. It had a red or green full skirt trimmed with embroidery and sequins and a square-necked

blouse heavily embroidered with big roses. A yellow or green sash and a large, decorated Mexican hat completed the outfit.

Other women dressed as Spanish señoras or señoritas with pure white trailing gowns and heirloom mantillas.

The men might dress as Spanish grandees, frock-coated gamblers, Indians, cowboys, or simply in dark trousers, white shirts, and red sashes.

Various dancers and dance groups from far and near performed on a platform erected in the center of the plaza. Mariachi bands of local and Mexican musicians played catchy Mexican dance songs. They were dressed in charro (Mexican cowboy) outfits. Some suits were black; some were a rich tan. The peg-leg tight trousers and short, tight jackets were elaborately decorated with silver thread embroidery and a double row of sliver buttons running down the outside seams. Each pair of buttons was about two inches apart and connected by a silver chain or strips of metallic silver braid. Their Mexican hats with high crowns and very wide brims matched the suits and were elaborately embroidered with silver thread in a scroll design. Their instruments consisted of trumpets, violins, and guitars of various sizes, from small to average to *very* big. They played with great gusto.

Hundreds of Indians displayed their jewelry and pottery on the sidewalks. There were many different kinds of parades, including a children's and pet parade. The most impressive parade reenacted the entry of de Vargas into

Santa Fe after his reconquest of the territory. The men were dressed in the old military Spanish style and rode magnificent horses.

A beautiful patio in one of the old buildings was the setting for a style show. Descendants of the early Spanish settlers modeled gowns of heavy silks, satins, and brocades that were fashionable attire from 1840 to 1900 and that their grandmothers and great grandmothers once wore. Weddings gowns made in the centers of fashion, one from New York and another from Paris and imported via the Santa Fe Trail by Spanish aristocrats, were shown. Refreshments consisted of Mexican cinnamon-flavored hot chocolate, biscochitos (anise flavored sugar cookies), cupcakes, and tiny empañadas (a small tart filled with spiced meat or fruit).

Festivities came to a close on Sunday evening with a candlelight procession in memory of those killed in the Indian Rebellion of 1680. The procession began at the Cathedral following the Mass. Each person with his lighted candle walked through the city and up a hillside path. The way was lighted by small bonfires, and led to the Cross of the Martyrs, where the Archbishop spoke to the crowd and pronounced a benediction. The same traditions continue today.

In mid-September, when the leaves of the aspen trees had changed from their lovely pale green to their gorgeous bright yellow, Bernice Ludlow, Lucy Bestwick, and Ruth Drack with me at the wheel drove to Antonita, Colorado. From there we rode over the mountains to Chama, New

Mexico, on the narrow gauge train. Even though we left Embudo at 5 a.m. to drive the 82 miles, we came close to missing the train. The first part of the drive was on rough and rocky roads. We crossed the Rio Grande and climbed up out of its canyon on a narrow, steep road with several hair-pin curves. By this time, I had been driving in New Mexico long enough to be used to driving on such roads and made quite good time. It was when we reached the mesa that our troubles began.

There had been rain on the mesa during the night. The road looked dry but was just wet enough to be as slippery as grease. This substance is called caliche. The tracks showed that some other vehicle had passed that way so I knew we could make it. We skidded, slithered, and slipped our way across the mesa. My passengers exclaimed over and over about the beautiful scenery and sunrise, but I did not dare to take my eyes off the road. For a short way we had a respite when we reached a black-topped road and made up for some lost time. However, we were soon slogging through the mud once again. About twenty minutes before train time we were in sight of Antonita and knew that we could make it in time. But our troubles were not over. We had a flat tire! We had some tense moments when the base of the jack seemed to be missing but we found it, the tire was changed, and we reached the train station with a whole five minutes to spare!

The train huffed and puffed into the station, backed out, and finally came in again to stop for passengers. The locomotive and cars were so narrow and low, the train

looked like a toy. The conductor and brakeman were in spotless uniforms. The coach was very pretty, with upholstery in various pastel colors. Because we were too late to get seats together, the conductor let us sit in the parlor car at no extra fare. It was very nice, with swivel chairs and a dining alcove. We were pleased to find that we could buy breakfast there as well. After our hair-raising drive, we were hungry.

The train trip was well worth all of the trouble we had in getting there. The track wound up through the mountains by a series of long loops and switchbacks. There were many trestles and tunnels. As we came out of one tunnel, we could look down into a gorge several thousand feet deep and see the Chama River rushing far below. The altitude at the top of that pass was 10,015 feet, and we were literally in clouds up there. The trees were gorgeous! Some aspens with their white trunks were bright yellow, others were an orange-yellow, and some still had a touch of green. The evergreen trees displayed many different shades of green, from dark to light, and the sumac and scrub oak were dark, fiery red. Each vista seemed more beautiful than the last, and some places were so beautiful we gasped with delight.

Ruth Drack, who was visiting her sister, Pearl, had made the train trip the previous week, so she drove the hospital car from Antonita over to Chama and met us there. We had dinner in an old rustic hotel decorated with antlered deer heads. We returned to Embudo by a different and longer route. It rained part of the way. The creeks and arroyos were raging with mud and water, but the road was good and we had no trouble.

In December 1939 we went to Madrid, New Mexico, twenty-eight miles southeast of Santa Fe, to see the Christmas decorations. Madrid was a shabby little coal mining town where the miners lived. Each Christmas the entire town was lavishly decorated, and tableaux were arranged on the surrounding mountains. At intervals along the main street there were pine bough arches decorated with electric lights. There were nativity scenes on some of the porches. One house had a wood cutout of Santa, complete with sleigh and reindeer, on its rooftop. Along the edge of the flat-roofed Spanish style houses, luminarias were set close together. (A luminaria is a lighted candle in a brown paper bag weighted down with sand. They make a beautiful glow!) Madrid's baseball diamond had been made into a Walt Disney village with a toy merry-go-round and ferris wheel, little houses, and characters from Walt Disney films.

This was all very pretty, but we had really come to see the Christmas scenes and figures on the mountains and in the foothills. These were painted, wooden cutouts. In order to appear of normal size, they were made bigger than life. On one peak there was a fairy-tale-book castle complete with towers and turrets and painted in pink and blue. On another there was a lighted chapel with a choir. Their carols were played on a record player with amplified volume and easily heard as we drove along Madrid's Main Street. The village of Bethlehem graced another peak, and not far away was a group of shepherds clustered around a fire with their sheep. Periodically a spot light—"a great light"—was shown on them, angels appeared, and there was singing, again an amplified record. The wise men were seen riding their

camels. Cutout figures of Mary, Joseph, and the Babe were seen on their flight to Egypt. It all looked absolutely real. In a stable next to the downtown inn there was a nativity scene with life-sized three-dimensional wooden figures of Mary in a blue robe, Joseph in a brown tunic, the Baby Jesus in swaddling clothes, and some shepherds wrapped in brown blankets. Live sheep and a burro made it all look even more lifelike. The star and other lights appeared in the foothills. Later we were told that the mining company paid for all of this with money withheld from the miners' wages.