

CHAPTER ONE

Espanola – Yesterday & Today

In the season of good harvest, nowhere are the lands more lush or the crops more colorful than in the Española Valley. The Valley farms are bright with red chiles, with pumpkins and squashes and colored corn drying on the rooftops. For rural living in New Mexico — or anywhere — few areas enjoy any more advantages than the valley where the conquistadores founded the first New Mexico colony 366 years ago.

- George Fitzpatrick and John Sinclair, 1965

1.01 An Historical Snapshot

1.02 Present Day Character

Figure 1-1 Rio Grande



Source:

1.01 An Historical Snapshot

Native New Mexicans settled in Pueblos in Northern New Mexico for over 2,000 years, and for centuries the Pueblo Indian culture of Northern New Mexico has remained vibrant. In 1598, Spain colonized Española as the first capital of New Mexico. After 50 years of Spanish exploration, Spanish settlers and Mestizos came to the San Juan Pueblo, north of present day Española. They brought a new language, religion, architecture, foods, crops, the horse and systems of mining and other elements of their culture. In fact, when the Pilgrims landed at Plymouth Rock, the Española Valley was already a well established colony. And, when the Pilgrims were celebrating their first Thanksgiving in America, children who had accompanied the first Spanish settlers—and even babies born in New Mexico—had already grown up and married in Española. (Fitzpatrick and Sinclair 1965) Despite earlier hostilities and resentment, the Spanish and Pueblo realized they were each a permanent part of the human landscape and came together in a unique and cooperative evolving community. Across the centuries, the interplay of natural and human forces has made Española the distinctive city it is today.

Between 1500 and 1880, Hispanic and Native peoples' lifestyles changed very little. During this time, people depended upon the land for survival, and Española's early economy was almost completely based on agriculture. (Rothman 1992) Crops, orchards and livestock secured the lives of the Indians and early settlers.

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Figure 1-2 Railroad Photo



Source:

The coming of Juan de Onate with Spanish Colonists and Mexican Indians in 1598 did bring changes in agricultural development—the infusion of maize, beans and chili added to the diversity of crops. In addition, irrigation networks of the Pueblos were extended and many new acequias—trenches or excavated ditches along a watercourse that move or divert water through gravity flow—were constructed to irrigate growing farmland and to sustain communities. (Rio Arriba County 2000)

Over time, Acequias became the political subdivisions for the State of New Mexico. The acequia systems instituted mayordomo, La Comission and Parciantes as the governing structure for the acequia system. This governance stated the basis for the priority system of water rights known as the Law of Appropriation that referenced water rights on a first come, first serve basis. From this structure, individual deeds within a community were established and served to separate ownership of the irrigated parcels of land. The governance and administration of the acequia system ensured water resources were distributed equitably to all community members. (Rio Arriba County 2000) This acequia system and governance structure became the basis for modern water law in New Mexico.

Figure 1-3 Main Street



Source: City of Espanola

Throughout the 19th century, Anglo merchants, mountain men, and settlers slowly filtered into Española. In 1881, The Denver & Rio Grande Railroad’s “The Chili Line” came into the Valley with its southern terminus at the site of what is now the Plaza de Española, a quarter of a mile west of the Rio Grande. With the arrival of the railroad, the City’s economy made a major shift from subsistence farming towards merchant trade, and Española’s downtown emerged as a trade center as well as a hub for the exportation of wine, wool and produce.

The railroad connected Española with mainstream North American culture. The American settlers recognized the potential of Española as a regional mercantile center for providing manufacturing goods to the Hispanic and Native people of the rural villages of the area. This forever altered dependence on the land for survival and centuries-old folkways and culture.

As trade continued to grow through the late 19th and early 20th centuries, so did Española. Stores proliferated, along with hotels, restaurants, and other enterprises as they met the needs of residents and a growing service sector. In 1925, Española was incorporated as a city, and by 1941 the thriving City of Española was clearly a hub of North Central New Mexico.

In 1943, the Española Valley began again to experience considerable change with the arrival of the Los Alamos National Laboratory—one of the original Manhattan Project laboratories responsible for the development of the Atomic Age. In 1960, due to growth and development throughout the State of New Mexico, major transformations of the historical acequia systems that had traditionally governed land and community were experienced. In this same era, artists were also drawn to the inspiring landscape and unique cultural mix of the Española Valley. Ultimately—though the railroad has since disappeared—Española has continued to grow and prosper through the 20th century as a commercial center for Northern New Mexico.

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1.02 Present Day Character

Today, the City of Española has much to be proud of. Española shares a natural history dating back before the dinosaurs—it has a unique geology and hosts species of plants and animals that can be found no where else. The City offers a vast history of human activity, reaching back over many centuries, with monuments of ancient settlements still preserved today. Española, like other Northern New Mexican communities, has experienced both Civil War and Wild West history, as well as the making of the Atomic Age and Space Age. Today, Española is culturally rich with Pueblo communities, legacies of Spain and Mexico, and a strong artistic and architectural heritage. (Miller 2002) All of this lies in the beautiful, diverse valley landscape located at the convergence of the Rio Grande, Rio Chama, and Santa Cruz rivers, between the spectacular Jemez and Sangre de Cristo mountain ranges.

Figure 1-4 Española's Future Generation



Source: Tom Leatherwood

As mentioned earlier, the City of Española was incorporated in 1925. The City operates under a mayor / council form of government. The mayor serves as Chair of the City Council and is elected at large for a four-year term. Richard Lucero, the current mayor, was elected on March 3, 1998. Eight council members are elected at large for four-year terms with staggered elections every two years. The most recent council election was held on March 5, 2000. The City Council appoints a City Manager who acts as chief administrative officer for the City. (CUED 2001)

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The City of Española lies within two county jurisdictions, Rio Arriba County and Santa Fe County—and includes land under the jurisdiction of two Indian Pueblos—San Juan and Santa Clara. San Juan is located north of Española and is the largest of six Tewa speaking Pueblos. The San Juan Pueblo has a long tradition of political leadership—Popé, a religious leader from San Juan, led the Pueblo Revolt in 1680. This uprising influenced the settlement of Northern New Mexico for many years by securing Pueblo’s self-governance rights.

Santa Clara Pueblo is also located in the Española region. Santa Clara is the second largest of the six Tewa-speaking Pueblos and is located southwest of the City. The Santa Clara Pueblo is home to the descendents of the Anasazi people, who have lived in the Valley for almost 1,000 years and were the architects of the cliff dwellings at Puye. Just south of the City, there are three other Pueblos—Pojoaque, San Ildefonso and Nambe. Two other Pueblos—Picuris and Tesuque—lie within 25 miles of the City.

Travel promoters have long recited that Santa Fe lies within the most scenic 100-mile square in the United States. Española can make the same claim, for it is in the heart of this same area of “magnificent scenery, spectacular archaeological pre-history and unique cultural interest.” (Fitzpatrick and Sinclair 1965) The Indian Pueblos, the Puye and other cliff dweller ruins, Bandelier National Monument, the Jemez Mountains and Valle Grande, ancient ruins, intriguing hot springs, ghost towns, spectacular scenery and a variety of other features offer a great scope of tourism interest. (Fitzpatrick and Sinclair 1965)

These unique attributes, alongside important local amenities—roads to provide ready access to local shopping and other towns and cities, local and nearby work opportunities, vibrant neighborhoods and cultural tradition, good schools for Española’s children—meet everyday needs and enhance everyday life in Española.

Indeed, the Pueblo Indians of Northern New Mexico, as well as the people of Oñate’s time, knew a good thing when they saw it—and the dozens of succeeding generations of their descendants have proved their good judgment.