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A Century of Mananas

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THE VILLAGE of Questa, New Mexico, is about to observe the centennial of its founding. Although, in this land of dreamy leisure, the calendar is not closely marked, still the passage of a century is noteworthy.

Questa lies some twenty miles south of the Colorado state line, and directly outside the Carson National Forest. Picture a cluster of tawny adobe houses, brightened by sky-blue casements and gardens of hollyhocks, sunflowers, and geraniums in gay profusion. Buildings and blossoms appear to have been scattered with equal planlessness. One long road meanders amiably among the abodes of chickens, dogs, goats, and human beings, while the varied inhabitants stare with unwinking solemnity at "foreign" automobiles driven past. The nearest railway station is Jaroso, twenty-three miles distant; but there are three highway approaches: one from Colorado over La Vita Pass (following the old Kiowa Trail, second in importance only to the east-and-west Indian route which coincided in some places with the later Santa Fe Trail); another from Cimarron and the east over Red River Pass; and a third up through Box Canyon from Taos, thirty miles to the south. It would be difficult to say which of the three highways is most picturesque.

The Rio Grande lies eight miles to the west, but the source of water supply is Laguna Cabresta, high above in the adjacent forest, and the Rito Cabresta, which winds seven serpentine miles down Cabresta Canyon to spread its coolness across the floor of Questa Valley, where the elevation is 7,800 feet. There is, in connection with this lake and its outlet stream, a long-used and dependable irrigation system. In addition, the Thunder Bird almost daily flaps its wings over this region during a great part of the growing season. Questa Valley does not lack water, and has never known famine.

In 1835 the first permanent settlement was made in this favored spot. True, the Utes and Apaches were there first, but they cannot be called permanent settlers, much as they struggled to remain so. The group of colonists who displaced them came from vicinity of Santa Fe, and claimed descent from the Spanish Conquerors. They bore proud names: Martinez, Gonzales, Valdez, Rael, Cordovaz, Archuletas, Gomez, Cisneros, Gallegos—most of which survive in Questa Valley's present population of fourteen or fifteen hundred. The colonists had large families and mingled little with outsiders. Change of government in 1848 affected them not at all.

The newcomers owned many slaves. No negroes have ever been seen in Questa; the slaves were Navajo, Ute, and Apache captives. Indians, in turn, enslaved the settlers at every opportunity. Descendants of the settlers say that the Indian slaves were stubborn fellows, but after being once subdued were faithful and industrious and capable of enduring great hardship. They were freed by Lincoln's Emancipation proclamation. After they were freed, most of these slaves stayed on with their former masters, and race distinctions were gradually obliterated. Other remnants of the Indian tribes were moved to reservations.

The early Questan built his house, or *plazuela,* in a square or sometimes in a circle, around a court with one big gate. Such a house, with numerous connecting rooms all on one floor, sheltered several families and a host of slaves. At night the livestock was driven into the court for safety. *Plazuelas* were of adobe brick and plaster. Walls were twenty to twenty-four inches thick. Roofs were of split pine, adobe-coated, and nearly flat, sloping a little outward. Floors were commonly of adobe, and sometimes a step or two below the level of the court, upon which all doors and windows opened. There were no exterior apertures except a few transomlike windows placed high, close to the beams

(vigas) and used for observation or defense. There was no glass in any of the windows.

Furnishings were primitive. Cupboards and shelves of adobe were built into the walls. Adobe benches stood beside the adobe bell-fireplace *(fagon de campana)*, which had a smoke-hole but no chimney. There were plenty of jars and bowls obtained from Indian pottery-makers. There was a big round oven in which bread was baked every day. Since matches were unknown, fire was lighted by hitting a *pedernal* (flint-rock) with a piece of steel. The women always contrived to have flowers growing.

Each home was in reality a factory. Blankets, rugs, and clothing were woven on looms. Lace curtains were made by hand. Shoes were hand-made of cowhide and buckskin. Flour was ground, as a rule, on the *molino*—two large stones, one stationary, the other moved by water-power; the hand-operated *metate* was likewise in use for grinding.

For medicines the old women brewed herbs; some of their "science" they learned from the Indian *puebleños;* some of it came down from European tradition. After nearly a century, there are still no doctors in Questa; the herb-brewers have things their own way, unless medical aid be summoned from Taos or Jaroso. The people look remarkably healthy and robust, but I am told that the mortality rate was high in winter, due to starchy diet and consequent low resistance to pneumonia, especially among children. There would seem to be no need for insufficiently varied diet if forethought were exercised, for the valley is fertile and produces all kinds of vegetables, in addition to apples, cherries, wild plums, and garden plums, currant, and various berries. Staple crops consist of alfalfa, wheat, oats, and corn. Tobacco was formerly raised, as well as sugar cane from which syrup was made with a press; but after it became possible to import sugar and tobacco their cultivation was discontinued.

In the early days, hunting companies were formed every autumn to visit the eastern buffalo plains. The hunters brought back enough dried buffalo meat to fill whole rooms with it for food in winter. They left the bones to bleach on the plains, and made sacks of the hides in which to carry the meat.

Old-style weapons, the blunderbuss, the sling, the bow-and-arrow, were kept conveniently by, ready for instant use. For many years the settlers maintained a sentinel day and night on the heights of an over-hanging mountain. Even then, stealthy Indians might spring an unpleasant surprise. They would wait until the men of the *plazuela* were out harvesting, then attack, and carry off both property and people.

One Questa family tells of an Indian marauder who climbed unseen to the housetop while Anita, the cook, was frying *tortillas* for the midday meal, in a baked-clay vessel over the fire. The Indian could look down through the smoke-hole and see what was going on. He proceeded to spear the *tortillas* with a hook. Anita was at first puzzled; then she caught a glimpse of the hook and guessed the rest. Quickly she seized an *olla* of cold water and emptied it into the sizzling grease; loudly she called for help. The visitor, effectually blinded, rolled down off the wall; men came running in from the fields, grabbed the helpless Indian, and made him a slave.

The patron saint of Questa is San Antonio. In the early 'forties a church was built. The adobe walls of this interesting and well-preserved structure are four feet thick. The mammoth spruce beams were pulled into place by means of ropes made of buffalo and ox hides. The labor of Indian slaves was contributed by their masters; every Saturday they worked on the church until it was completed. The bells were made from jewelry donated by the people. A hired bell-maker came,and built fires of pitch and cedar to melt the metals, chiefly gold. He made two bells which were baptized respectively Santa Maria and San Antonio. Later,

when traders came to Questa and saw those precious bells, they persuaded the people to exchange them for other bells which they said would ring better—but were not of gold.

Half-a-dozen quaint images may be seen in the old church. They look much more at home there than an equal number of new ones, big and bright and Dresdeny by contrast. Of the old images, three were made in Questa and three were brought by the priests. They are stiff and stodgy and dull in coloring, yet somehow human and appealing. In dry weather the people would hold a *belorio*, or wake, to pray for rain. They would carry the images out into the fields, where altars had been built for them. Sometimes they prayed all night. Once they were nearly drowned by a sudden deluge; it was all they could do to save the images from destruction.

Until after the Civil War, dwellers in Questa had little contact with the outside world. Then the most enterprising began to take wagon loads of hides to the eastern markets, principally to St. Louis, occasionally to New York. They brought back fabrics, weapons, implements, and groceries. The people were glad to get tools, for they had no steel with which to make them. Early settlers sometimes dug ditches with wooden picks and shovels, and used ploughs made of oak roots.

Though life was often difficult, it was seldom devoid of amusement. *El baile* was always popular with this laughter-loving folk. Violins, guitars, and castanets furnished music, while candles burned in ceiling sconces, and sometimes dripped hot tallow on the dancers. A ceremonial Indian dance called the *matachin* was taken over by the Spaniards as recreation; it engaged four or five couples and called for much gesturing and posturing. More than once, Indian girls while dancing the *matachin* made signs which told where other captives were held.

Pastores were plays representing shepherds and the Three Kings, given oftenest at Christmas though sometimes

at other seasons. They dramatized the birth and youth of Christ. Several babies would be shown to symbolize the Massacre of the Innocents.

In the realm of sport, cockfights were favored, but *gallo* races were equally popular after horses became numerous. In the *gallo* race, all the participants, eight or ten, were mounted. A live rooster was buried in the middle of a field, with one leg left sticking up. Toward this prize the riders rushed pell-mell. The one who succeeded in pulling the rooster out by the leg, would ride wildly about, hitting his companions with the rooster. The others tried to snatch the fowl away from him, but they were not allowed to touch it with their hands. Each had a string about a yard long, with which he tried to loop the luckless rooster while swinging past.

Pelota was a game resembling hockey and rougher than football. There were two teams, with as many as fifty players on each team. The ball was of wool, with stones inside, and it was hit with a curved stick called a *chueco*. Sometimes a whole town would divide, and play *pelota;* or, Questa would play Cerra, a village five miles away, on Sunday afternoon —*all* Sunday afternoon. Afterward the losing team would give a dance. This practice lasted until about 1898.

Questa's educational needs were long neglected. Not until the 'eighties did the government establish rural schools. But at Costilla, twenty miles north, almost on the Colorado line, is a quaint, secluded convent school, Spanish in atmosphere, highly regarded as a cultural center.

Until recently, Questa had no telegraph line and no roads—only trails, which were buried deep in winter snows. Mail was formerly brought on foot from Fort Garland, then on horseback until 1914. Now, trucks bring mail twice a day, and the highways are open to traffic all winter, thanks to efficient snow clearance.

And how will Questa celebrate its centennial in 1935? I think I can tell you.

News will circulate that *los truchas* are striking. Victor Espinoza, owner of the Questa Garage, will check the cars brought to him for repairs and will decide that all the work can be done tomorrow as well as today. He will lock the doors and nail up a little card to show that he is still in business; then he will lose himself in Gua'lupe Canyon, and forget the machine age for a while.

Joe Vigil will look around his neat vegetable garden and see that no more weeding is necessary until tomorrow. Joe will climb into his flivver, pick up a friend or two, and spend a carefree day in the canyon of the Rito Cabresta. No doubt they will catch "limits"—and probably they will bestow their catch, with careless generosity and laughter, upon some inept fisherman from Chicago or Dallas, who has fished all day with no luck at all, and is beginning to be skeptical until he sees their string of salmon, brook, and rainbow beauties. Joe and his friends would rather eat *frijoles* without fish for supper, than *frijoles* and fish, if the difference were that visitors should carry away a wrong impression of the fishing in Cabresta Canyon.

Meanwhile, Clovis Cortez, having returned at 2 P. M. from his task of carrying the United States mail (the one job which cannot be postponed until *mañana),* will have got a late start; but he hastens to Box Canyon with his flies and reel, to make up for lost time. In passing the home of J. P. Rael, Clovis calls to him to bear him company, but he learns that J. P. Rael has taken his wife and children to bathe in the hot springs at Arroyo Hondo, having left his general store in charge of a cousin. This cousin, incidentally, has left the store in charge of another cousin, and has borrowed his uncle's mules to guide a tourist up the trail to the top of Flag Mountain. The uncle does not know that his mules have been borrowed, because the uncle has gone fishing in the Rio Grande Canyon, and will not be back until moonrise.

On Saturday night the usual weekly *baile* will be held in the lodge room behind the post office. As many as two hundred young people may attend. There will be a six-

piece orchestra comprising piano, saxophone, clarinet, and three drums, with the pianist the only man in the assembly privileged to wear his hat throughout the evening. Clovis Cortez will stand near the door, a smiling sergeant-at-arms, firmly refusing admittance to any young fellow who comes from the neighboring *cantina* in condition which Clovis describes as *borachito* (a little tipsy).

On Sunday morning Questa goes to mass, and on Sunday afternoon a baseball game with Cerra replaces the old-time *pelota*. Occasionally there is a Sunday-evening outdoor *fiesta* at Red River, eighteen miles away, held by tourists who have flocked in incredibly large numbers to Red River, during the last two or three years. Red River congregates to see the *fiesta* and Questa representatives drive over to see the tourists.

What a difference between the tourist-centers in northern New Mexico, and those spots which lie just off the beaten track! In Red River, the houses are of timber, new, with paint hardly dry; vacationists ride about on hired horses, resolutely rusticating and collecting names in addressbooks; the post-mistress is flustrated, dividing attention between handling much mail and counting out eggs and making change all at once.

In Questa, during the summer season, tourists who come and stay are still a novelty. Many travelers drive through, on the way from Santa Fe or Taos to Denver; many visitors come in from Red River (where the fishing is not so good any more) for a day at Laguna Cabresta. Very few bring camping outfits and settle down for weeks at a stretch, as we did. Questa does not cater to tourists—there is not a place where one can buy a picture postcard; there is not a restaurant where meals are served. (True, the *cantina* advertises sandwiches for sale, but I am reliably informed that these are "prop" sandwiches, continuously displayed but never eaten.) In other words, Questa is real; Questa is almost exactly what it used to be. Whereas in

Taos the little brown children besiege a visitor for tips, and clamor to act as guides to Kit Carson's house (which lies directly before their eyes), in Questa they are reticent and retiring; I made the mistake of buying a piece of candy for one little fellow I saw standing in the post office store; whereupon he burst into tears and ran away, thinking I had mistaken him for a beggar. I stood there holding the wretched all-day sucker in my hand and wondering what sardonic psychologist had given the confection its name.

Questa has such pride, such self-sufficiency, such joyous unconcern for what takes place beyond its borders—I can't help hoping that Questa will celebrate its centennial by preserving its individuality, as is.