Cañones

Plans for the future face memories of the past in a small mountain village

By Michael Gisick
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Tumbling from the mountains, Cañones Creek cuts a narrow, green path through a canyon south of Abiquiú Lake.

As the canyon begins to widen, the creek feeds into a network of acequias that water the nearby alfalfa and pasture land, where bulls and horses bend their necks to the grass in the village of Cañones.

It passes two boys irrigating a field, their brown dogs wrestling each other in the grass. It passes two girls, laughing as they speed by on a red four-wheeler.

Past the homes of a few Anglos and the blue shining dome of a Greek orthodox monastery, it reaches the little village of 100 souls. A ramble of adobes, wood-framed homes and trailers whose layout is dictated by the steep land, the village is green where the water can be made to reach. Where it cannot, it is tan-brown.

One of the most reliable waterways in Northern New Mexico, Cañones Creek slices past the village toward the reservoir that dams the Rio Chama.

The creek's path through the canyon has always been the only way into and out of the village of Cañones. Now there is an adjacent road, and the highway lies only ten minutes north. But for generations, Cañones carried on in isolation.

Bound by mountains on three sides, its people spoke the elegant Spanish of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza well into the 20th century. Their lives were hard but, held in as they were by the mountains and far as they were from the rest of the world, they were bound together in the embrace of the village.

When they harvested or slaughtered or hunted, they did so together, and shared the results. None grew fat, but none went hungry — except sometimes at the end of winter, when all went hungry, and the Lenten season of fasting came along rather conveniently.

(SUNfoto by Michael Gisick)

Cerros Pedernal looms above an abandoned house at the north end of Cañones. Below, Richard Madrid, right, and Jordan Maestas prepare to head out to the fields.

They built themselves a church. Though they never had a resident priest, the village Morada was strong, clutching the traditions of the faith: the saints and the savior and the glory.

Cañoneros traded with, and sometimes fought with, the Utes and Navajos. For a time, they lived under the auspices of the Republic of Mexico, but no one noticed that very much. In 1847, when an army led by Virginians toppled Chapultapec, Cañones became a part of the United States of America. For years, no one noticed that very much either.

The changes came slowly. By the early years of the 20th century, much of the village's peripheral lands had been lost to land prospectors and, at length, to the U.S. Forest Service. But the village remained intact. As recently as the 1970s, anthropologists visited Cañones to study the unique Hispaño culture of the north.

By then, Cañones was changing fast. The Pentecostal religion had arrived in the 1950s, and several families converted from the Catholic Church. Electricity arrived. Then the television — or, because of poor reception in the village, at least the rumors of the television — the stories of cities and riches and cars.

In the 1960s, the young began to leave Cañones, a trend that gathered steam through the proceeding decades. Some would later try to return, but in many cases their family land had been sold.

Many of those who did return came back with dramatically different ideas about life. La communidad de Cañones, a culture as old, reliable and set in its course as Cañones creek, began to shift.

"It's sad to see. At one time I thought we were a united community," said Debra Gallegos, the village postmaster. "Now we see one group with their own way of doing things, and others go to another way."

Many agree that change has not been for the better here, especially among the older generations. But that is one of the few things many agree on.

A fight among Cañoneros for control of a land grant that includes much of the village has wound its way, with increasing bitterness, to federal court. With the case pending, most of the land sits under an injunction that villagers say prevents them from cleaning up a makeshift dump, let alone dividing land for their children or other relatives who want to move back.

A fight over burial rules at the village cemetery has grown even uglier, with some residents — backed by the church — demanding an end to the burial of non-Catholics and those they see as outsiders. Others dismiss the demands as backwards, and vow to go on with the burials.

"It's a bad situation now, but I don't know what can be done," said Orlinda Gallegos, Debra Gallegos's mother and her predecessor as village postmaster. "People don't think alike anymore. People stay in their houses with their satellites. It's not as much of a community now."

The conflicts over land and burials are the outcroppings, but many in Cañones describe deeper layers of concern. Older res-

See 'Village' on B2

Village Residents Struggle Over Future of Cañones . . .

Continued from B1

idents worry about the intentions of the younger generations, most of whom commute to Espanola and Los Alamos for work and bring fewer traditional attitudes to the community. Lifelong residents resent what they see as the increasing encroachment of outsiders, including some who claim their roots in Cañones.

It all seems to revolve around the same question: who is, and who is not, a Cañonero?

Ruby Valdez is not one of those grasping for the past.

Valdez moved to Cañones recently from Española, she said, because she wanted to raise children here, within the safety and beauty of the canyon, where a child could wander with little danger of harm or serious temptation.

While she has taken an active role in the community, serving as a lay leader in the church, Valdez has also become a vocal leader for a group of younger Cañoneros and others who returned to the village from elsewhere.

Like some of those, Valdez works at Los Alamos National Laboratories, and faces a 45 minute commute to work. Her children, who attend school in Abiquiú, face a ride almost as long.

"It's a sacrifice in some ways, but we love it here. We love waking up in the morning and seeing the mountains," Valdez said. "All we're saying is, there needs to be some improvement."

Among them, Valdez said, the community needed to work to reopen its elementary school, so children didn't have to ride to Abiquiú or Coyote for classes. She'd like to see a computer lab with internet access, as well, and improvements to the village's community center.

"We need to give the kids here access to technology and resources so they can keep up," she said. "And we need to give them some things to do. It's not like we're trying to change the whole community, just make it a little better."

But Valdez has also taken a leading role in the fight over the cemetery, a far more controversial issue that has placed her squarely at odds with older members of the community.

"I don't understand what their problem is," she said. "I don't understand why they want to divide the community. They're very stuck in the old ways.

"The younger generation wants change, "Valdez said. "If they (the older generation) want to help: great. Otherwise, they need to get out of the way."

Dennis Gallegos moved from Cañones years ago, but still travels there from his home in Coyote several days a week to tend his livestock.

"It's God's land, I call it," he said, recalling his youth spent in the village. "You didn't judge your day by the time on a clock."

When they weren't in school or working the fields, the children played baseball and marbles. In the summer, they dammed the creek to make a swimming pool.

(SUNfoto by Michael Gisick)

Andres Salazar, left, and cousin Daniel Abeyta, of Albuquerque, pause from irrigating a family field in Cañones.

But Gallegos was part of the generation that began to leave Cañones. Many left at least in part out of necessity. Families began to grow too large for the village's subsistence farming to support, and as logging in nearby forests dried up, men had to look elsewhere for work. As the outside world began to leave its impression on Cañones, however, many more were drawn away by the lure of America.

"First it was a few guys who went to work in Colorado or California, and they would come back with a car and a radio," he said. "It seemed very glamorous, so other guys would follow."

Now, Gallegos said, he sensed the trend had reversed. Many younger people – like Valdez – were returning to Cañones to raise their families, while others were going off to college and then returning.

"If you're willing to make the commute, nowadays you can do it. The problem is, the people who move out and come back, they come back with different attitudes. They want things their way," he said. "But you're not going to change things overnight. With time, maybe, but there are a lot of people who are going to resist. The culture has a lot of roots in that community still."

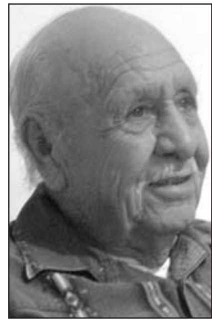
Pushing for immediate change, Gallegos said, would only further alienate the residents who felt things had changed too much already.

"The elders are the hard core of the community. Their strength has held it together," he said. "If you try to pull the rug out from under them, its like pulling a scab off an old wound. They can't just come in saying, 'I went to college and I know this and that.'"

And though he has ambivalent feelings – at best – about the changes being wrought in Cañones, Gallegos has little hope things can be put back as they were, and that accounts for the pain.

"That sense of camaraderie that we had has been lost," he said. "It was a great feeling to be a part of it, but I don't think I'll ever see it again."

Serafin Valdez, who at 79 has long been one of the village's leading figures, has also seen the tide of Cañones youth returning.



Serafin Valdez

"People thought they were going to make a lot of money over there wherever, but they find out its pretty expensive," he said. "They want to come back here where they can live for free, drive to work, and maybe make some money."

Many of those, however, including his two granddaughters, ran into problems. Family plots had been sold away, and the county would not allow subdivisions of less than three-quarters of an acre. Since most plots in the village itself were already small, in his role as a trustee of the Juan Valdez Land Grant, Valdez had tried to begin subdividing land from the grant.

The grant included 1.500 acres, he said. Surely some could be given to the children of the village.

Instead, Valdez said, another faction led by his nephew, County Manager Lorenzo Valdez, had filed suit claiming the grant belonged to the Valdez heirs and that the board of trustees was illegitimate. As the suit worked its way through the legal system, the heirs had placed an injunction against any development on the land.

"The land grant has always been there for the community," Serafin Valdez said. "I don't know why they are doing this. Now we can't do anything. If Lorenzo keeps fighting this he's going to lose it all to the government and the whole thing will become a big BLM ghost town."

Valdez said he believed his nephew, who had not really lived in Cañones for decades, was simply trying to take over the community for himself.

"Lorenzo wants to retire here," Serafin Valdez said. "All by himself."

Over lunch, Lorenzo Valdez laughed at the notion. He and other heirs – including former Espanola Police Chief A.B. Valdez – had stepped in only to stop the runaway, haphazard development of the grant, he said. The board of trustees had become little more than an instrument for Serafin and his immediate family.

"He says he want to help out the young people," Lorenzo Valdez said. "Of course he's only talking about his grandchildren."

But Valdez said he greatly resented the implication that he was an outsider, that he and his family did not belong to Cañones. It was the burial of his own nephew, a boy he had raised as a son, that had started the whole conflict over the cemetery.

"I don't know how it has gotten to this point, but I'm very disillusioned," he said. "I think we have the threat of greed and exclusion, and I'm not going to accept it. If that's what it's going to be, we'll step in and take legal control."

Though he left the village as a boy, Valdez spoke as passionately as anyone about the Cañones of memory – the baseball games and horse races and evening visits between families.

"It was about working together, cultivating, fixing fences, breaking horses, branding cows, all of us doing it together," he said. "That was the sense of community we had, but it is badly eroded now."

Valdez traced the changes back to 1847. Though it came slowly, the American system of profits and private properties had arrived, peeling away the old fabric of communal life. The religious divisions, the exodus of the youth, the babble of the satellites – all had their effect.

"What do they call it now – globalization?" Valdez said. "This is a fight happening in traditional communities around the world – in Latin America, in Mongolia. It's about how does a community survive against the onslaught of the world, and amazingly enough, Cañones is right in the center of it."

As much as may have changed in Cañones, a drive through the village and into the canyon reveals much that has survived. Few people tend the land for a living now, but the fields are still irrigated, the animals still raise their heads indifferently to a passer-by.

Watering a family field, 17 year-old Andres Salazar waves and comes to the fence to talk. He tells excitedly of the play he is acting in at Northern New Mexico College – a play about a traditional family restaurant struggling to come to terms with the changing appetites of its customer.

"I guess that's the same thing that's happening here," he reflects. "The same thing with the generations, people being afraid of change."

Still, Salazar said he hopes to return to Cañones.

"I'll go away to college, but if I can get some land here, I'd like to return," he said. "This would be a good place to live a life."

Farther up the canyon, the blue and gold onion dome of the eastern orthodox monastery of Saint Michael rises implausibly among the trees. Built by a small group of monks in the early 1990s, the monastery has carved out a place in the village – nearly all villagers speak approvingly of it.

A few villagers sometimes attend prayer services there, the monastery's founder, Father Andrew, said. Many more come to their feast day, including the village band led by Postmaster Debra Gallegos and her husband.

"They're really very good," Father Andrew said. "Part of the services are in Spanish. They seem to enjoy themselves."

Father Andrew said he had kept an assiduous distance from Cañones politics, but over the years he had developed a great appreciation for the village and its ways and, especially, the language.

"The wonderful thing about the Spanish here is that the people use so many beautiful archaic terms. It's as if you went somewhere in the U.S. and people were saying 'thee' and 'thou,'" he said. "That language has died out everywhere else, including in Spain. It's amazing they've preserved it here for 400 years with absolutely no encouragement since the Americans came."

Though the light of the language had begun to die away among many of the young people, he said, many in the village still spoke beautifully, and not all of them old.

Father Andrew

"You ought to speak with Isaiah," he said, walking a path that winds along through the green of the rushing creek. "He is a real renaissance man. He speaks very well."

A Spanish teacher at Pojoaque Valley Schools, Isaiah Velasquez was found nearby, tending one of the monastery's vegetable gardens. Taking a seat on the back of his pick-up truck, Velasquez talked about the village history, its founding by villagers wandering from Abiquiú generations ago. His own family went back at least five generations in the village.

"This is still a place where almost everyone is related to some extent or another," he said.

While some of the community's bonds had become strained, they still held, he said. When one man's house caught fire a few months earlier, everyone went to help.

"Anybody who had a truck or a tractor or a backhoe was there," he said. "That's what's good about this place. People are still very willing to put whatever conflicts they may have to the side and help each other."

Even so, the divisions in the community were growing difficult to ignore. Velasquez himself said he sided with those in the community who believed, for example, that burials at the cemetery must be more restrictive.

"People here have very deep roots to this community," he said. "It has changed a lot in the past ten years or so, and people are nervous."

As much as the community valued its peace, he said, it needed to come together to settle its differences before the questions fell into the hands of those with no stake in the village's future.

Down in the village, Debra Gallegos agreed.

"It's not going to be easy, but we have to have better communication," the postmaster said. "We have to, before something very bad happens."