

Lorin W. Brown

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Early Days of Customs at Agua Fria

I had stopped for a drink of water from a well in the patio of a group of houses in lower Agua Fria. While drinking I reflected how well named the little village had been. For the water from its springs and wells is very cold and refreshing and I could visualize how grateful man and beast must have been in those days of slow travel. The magnificent grove of large cotton woods made an ideal camping spot for travelers on the way from Santa Fe to La Bajada and other points in Rio Abajo or the lower Rio Grande.

While still at the well, Nicolas Lopez approached leading a pair of small horses. After greetings I helped him draw water for his thirsty team. "Que calor amiquito, if it would only rain so that we would be sure of saving our beans and corn. But the good God knows what he is doing, there is no use in worrying. He will not fail us. Let us go into my house where it is cool." Entering the cool earthen floored room I offered a chair.

From Don Nicolas' conversation I gathered a picture of a much different life in Agua Fria, the life of my host's boyhood. Very meager opportunity for education was his lot. "The teacher was very good at punishing and our text book was the Cathecism and our arithmetic problems were worked on the surface of the school house door with charcoal." I was not allowed to go to school long. My father took some cattle to herd on the shares from Bishop Lamy and the sisters of charity. That was the last of my schooling. For a month at a time I would be gone from home, taking care of the cattle, sometimes towards Las Tetillas other times in the Arroyo Hondo wherever the grass was best." I will tell you the truth that when I left the school I stole a cathecism and while alone in camp I studied this book until it fell to pieces.

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Before it did fall to pieces it was so greasy and dirty you would have laughed to have seen it. And you would have laughed to have seen me when I would come home after a month or more in camp. I would have a head of hair like a buffalo and my clothes would be all torn and in a very sorry state. My father would shear me like I was a sheep.

After two days at home I would go back with provisions on my burros for another month or two. A very lonely life I am telling you for a boy.

I used to like to come home when the folks were boiling out syrup from the sugar cane. There used to be two mills here. Everybody would bring their cane to the presses and while the syrup was bailing or while the cane was being crushed, there would be dancing in the patio. Our musician was an Indian captive Antonio Dominguez who was very good on the violin. We had very good times then dancing nearly all nite and telling tales while the syrup boiled out. The children enjoyed it too because they were the ones who rode the cross beam which operated the pestle. There high up in the air they would rock back and forth shouting and laughing and fighting for their turn to ride.

"Those were great times and I was always glad to get back at those times and I would try to stay as long as I would enjoying myself, eating too much syrup and candy because in camp I tasted no sweets except when I could find wild honey."

"Why don't you raise any more cane now? Why have the times changed so. I don't see that they raise many crops here any more?" I asked.

"Oh then we had all the water we wanted" Now the water company has all the water which used to belong to us. You would not believe it but this dry river bed used to have willows growing along its banks from Santa Fe to Cienega. We had good ditches to carry water to all these lands.

We raised much corn and wheat. Oh we lived well then, from the land but now that is all past. Only if God is willing to send us rain do we raise anything now. "Todo pasa en este mundo" Everything passes in this world.

"Now we have very much work trying to find a little wood to sell in town. Soon we will have to move into town to find work and abandon our lands. My boys are all in town working now, that is why you find me here alone with my daughters-in-law and my grand children. I am getting too old to do any work except feed our "animalitos" and see that they get water.

But I do not have many years left and the good God willing I want to die here in my home where I was born."

by Lorin W. Brown

informant Nicolas Lopez of Agua Fria