

"Farm Together Now: A portrait of people, places and ideas for a new food movement" was a book published by Chronicle Books in late 2010 featuring interviews and photo essays about 20 farms across the United States. The book was a collaboration between Amy Franceschini & Daniel Tucker, with a foreword by Mark Bittman, Photography by Anne Hamersky & Illustrations by Corinne Matesich, Design by Brian Scott. see farmtogethernow.org

Chapter 15

The Acequiahood of the San Luis People's Ditch

San Luis, Colorado

Organizing body: 16 *parciantes* (affiliated water users)

Scale: irrigation of approximately 2,100 acres of crops

Type: nonprofit

Currently producing: hay, alfalfa, *chicos*, or corn, and squash

In operation: since 1852

Iconic plant/animal: *chicos*

Website: www.acequiainstitute.org

Joe Gallegos, a sixth-generation acequia farmer, irrigates his land from the Rio Culebra watershed of the San Luis Valley of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain Range, which feeds the San Luis People's Ditch, the oldest "water right" in Colorado. His great-great-grandfather, Dario Gallegos, cofounded the People's Ditch in 1852, making his family owners of one of the longest continuously running farms in Colorado. For his entire life he has been an activist in the historic acequia communities of the "Rio Arriba"—a seven-county area in south-central Colorado and northern New Mexico that is the headwaters of the Rio Grande system. The land they work and

how they work it is unique in many ways. As Gallegos often remarks, it's been working for thousands of years, so why should it be changed?

What's working is both a technique and a way of looking at the world. Acequia farms require water to naturally be fed into rivers, which are then channeled into man-made ditches called acequias. The acequias line a portion of unusually long plots of land, which are the farms.

Through an elaborate system of coordinating among neighbors, people who are close to one another because of their narrow lots and their need to share resources, the ditches are leaked in a controlled manner to flood the fields and irrigate crops. Beyond a complex physics experiment in gravity-fed irrigation that takes melting snow from a mountain and directs it into a field miles away, the process is a complex social organism—which takes a whole community to produce. It is called a modern “Water Democracy.”

Devon G. Peña, a scholar raised in Laredo, Texas, has made it his mission to embed himself in the culture and politics of the acequia farmers in San Luis. He initially visited while teaching at a nearby college, bringing buses of students to the San Luis Valley for mobile classroom experiences to train future scholar-activists like himself. Peña met Gallegos during one of those trips and learned the ropes of the acequia culture from Joe and his father. Throughout the years they worked together on farmers cooperatives, built an acequia association for the region, and recently passed a law within state legislature that officially recognizes acequias and their approach to common ownership of water.

Can you describe this bioregion?

Devon G. Peña (DP), founder of the Acequia Institute and a scholar-activist-farmer: It's the last place you would think agriculture would happen, because it's so high up: eight thousand feet above sea level. That's as high as Mt. Olympus.

But what people observe about this region is that you can walk through every major life zone in North America within a distance of a couple of miles, because you can go from eighteen thousand feet in elevation to four thousand within [that mileage]. It has an incredible range of altitude that gives it all these different life zones. And that's what makes this farming possible too, because if not for the high mountain peaks and the deep snow pack, and the forests that protect that snow pack, allowing it to be slowly released over time, you couldn't irrigate here. You could practice dry agriculture, but you wouldn't be able to produce the food we do, because we are a spring-melt-dependent irrigation system and entirely driven by the accumulation and releases of the snow pack.

We have a sixty- to ninety-day growing season, so we have had to adapt our corn, our bean, our squash: They are all short-season lives. Which immediately gets us to politics and political cunning, because there are a lot of biotechnology companies that would love to get ahold of sixty-eight- to seventy-day corn. There aren't too many places that can say they have ninety-day corn. You have to do it quickly at eight thousand feet surrounded by fourteen-thousand-foot

mountains!

Each bioregion is culturally distinct, with its own cultural heritage as well. This area is considered by many to be the mystical homeland of the Aztecs: Aztlán.

[begin sidebar]

Aztlán

During the rise of the Chicano movement in the 1960s, Aztlán became a symbol of the Chicano struggle to reunify with the land, to restore land rights, to restore all the lost land grants that became part of the public domain of the United States. It has significant meaning to people of Mesoamerican descent—those from the Aztec, Maya, and Inca regions stretching from Mexico through much of Central America and parts of South America—but specifically refers to the land of the Aztecs. In the southwestern United States, many of the national forests, the Bureau of Land Management areas, and National Park Service lands were originally Mexican and Spanish landmasses that became enclosed, privatized, or put into public domain.

[end sidebar]

Tell me about water, your relationship to it, and the logic behind the Acequiahood.

Joe Gallegos (JG), acequia farmer: My dad once told me, “Let the water tell you what to do.”

And I wonder about the political aspect of that: Does the water tell you to dam it? We have a

tendency not to let the water tell us what to do; instead we try to control it.

DP: We try to move it uphill toward money, defy the laws of gravity instead of listening to the water!

Part of the success of the acequia system is that it's based on human modesty; we are humble before the power of nature, and therefore our control of water is incomplete. I've described it as sort of how a beaver works. We don't control our water very well. It leaks all over the place. But it's that leaking that's created this oasis! That wouldn't have happened if we had cement-lined and piped everything.

If the water wants to go and create a wetland over there, you let it create that wetland. In doing that, you're creating habitat for wildlife. You're supporting migratory species, because they have a place to sit down and rest and get some food. So I like to describe us as equal-opportunity providers, because it is precisely the acequia's economic inefficiency that makes possible this bounty of biodiversity—we don't deny water to wild plants or animals. And that leads to a lot of geopolitical conflict, because we are in a way undermining the fundamental rules of Western water law by behaving the way we do.

Ever since the 1880s, we've been fighting off the modern state and court system that has viewed us as primitive, backward, inefficient. There's a book called *History of Agriculture in Colorado*, published in 1926 by what became Colorado State University Ag School [now the CSU College

of Agricultural Sciences] and written by Alvin T. Steinel. It reads: “under Spanish Americans, agriculture did not progress.” So we’ve been fighting not only a new law [and] a legal system that we see as incompatible with our original system of water law, we’re also fighting these stereotypes in the media, in policy-making circles, in the courts. The things judges have said about us over the years are amazing! “It’s time to bring these Mexicans into the twentieth century,” one judge said, because we were asking for the restoration of our common-use rights. So the battle here has always been not just about the conditions that make farming possible, but the ways in which we are perceived as a threatening, unassimilatable “other.”

How have you taken these ways of working—things you’ve learned from the acequia—and applied them into other parts of life? Is the acequia a model that can be transferred?

JG: I was once approached by a commissioner who was interested in using the Acequiahood as a model for negotiations. Acequia farmers have to negotiate all the time—it’s how we really try to avoid having to go to water court, which we hate. We’ve been called “radical” before, but we’re not radical—this has always been the way it’s been done.

DP: My understanding of the true meaning of “radical” is “back to the roots” . . . we never left our roots, so we’re not radical, we’re all ready there.

The first thing to recognize is that you don’t have to manage a ditch on the basis of individual utility. You can do it on the basis of mutual reliance and interest. There are alternative rationalities that create economic relationships that don’t depend on individual and utilitarian interest. It’s the collective interest of acequia that guides us all, and it requires an immense level of social interaction and cooperation to work. So you have to be very patient, and you have to

really know each other as well. You can't be strangers, because it requires constant sacrifice and waiting for your turn. Because of that mutual-reliance interest, you create a certain code of behavior that a lot of communities would find hard to reproduce.

Now, the rules of the acequia could be exported. A rule that works really well for us is that the ditch is considered a community resource rather than a private property, and the water is considered a community resource rather than a commodity. For example, at the beginning of every spring, we have to clean up the ditch together, which is a cooperative labor that is required by our law.

What motivated you to look to public policy to support your work here?

DP: Well, because it was all informal, it wasn't the law. We had a law that was different from our informal practices. So our law survived through informal practice. But as long as it's informal, there's always the threat that they're [the state] going to force you to do it the other way. And so I think there were a lot of events that convinced us that we needed to get a new water law passed.

For instance, there was a ruling in a divorce case—handled by the water judge who was also the divorce judge—that granted the water to the wife and the land to the husband, and that's against our customary law. We cannot separate the water from the land. It's a place-based asset, it's here to be used for acequia purposes only. Of course, it turned out the wife wanted to sell the land to a nonagricultural user for a subdivision. So we had to mobilize; we bought those water rights to

keep them in the acequia.

In the meantime, we worried that more defections could occur, more divisions of water from the land, and we needed to prevent that from happening. So in 1998 Joe and I created the Acequia Association. It took eleven years of organizing the acequia community, and then getting one of us elected to the state legislature, before any policy was passed—the Acequia Recognition Law (HB 09-1233)—signed by the governor in April of 2009.

What are you trying to do with the Acequia Institute?

DP: The idea for the Acequia Institute is twofold. One is to promote research on sustainable agriculture and food justice in acequia communities by funding graduate student research. Every year, we fund three grad students doing research, and it has to be participatory, collaborative-action research led by the farmers, directed by the farmers.

Then the other thing we do is fund three food-justice co-ops, all women-led: Community 2 Community in Bellingham, Washington, the South Central Farmers in Los Angeles/Bakersfield, and then a local program called the Novela Project, which makes a link between elder acequia farmers and youth. We're teaching youth about acequia irrigation methods and practices and addressing the food-sovereignty and heritage-cuisine needs of the elders, who have very poor access to fresh fruits and vegetables. So the Institute exists to bring together research, advocacy, and social action at the local grassroots level. That's where we're at, at this point.

Where do you want to see the Acequiahood in five years? Where do you want to see the community?

DP: I don't want to see the Family Dollar open here!

JG: Yeah, I don't either.

DP: This is still a community that's off the map. You have to travel forty-five miles to get fast food. I very much want to see this remain a slow, local, and deep-food community five years from now. It's not enough to be slow and local, we also have to recognize the need for a deep sense of place, for deep respect of local, space-based ecological wisdom. When you arrive at that, then you can really begin to negotiate sustainable agriculture without losing sight of the social justice dimension.

Climate change will surely affect political dynamics in the coming years, certainly in the next fifty. We're going to see major hydrological shifts occurring in this entire bioregion, and that's why one of the things we're doing through the Acequia Institute is trying to develop drought resistance through the use of roasting white corn. I got a white flint from people in Baja, California, that you don't even have to irrigate for it to produce corn, and so I'm trying to hybridize it with local *chicos* because they share a lot of texture qualities, and they're both short seeds and varieties, and they're not water hogs. Our local corn probably consumes one-tenth as much water as Midwestern corn, due to our irrigations.

The ruthless commodification of everything must be met with the decommodification of the

most basic thing, which is food, which becomes part of a web of social relationships instead of just a market product, or a thing with a price.

It's really more of a way of life than an occupation, to be an Acequia farmer. You're not going to make money. It's not about money—it's about a way of life that's very connected to place, and, therefore, with that connection comes a lot of responsibility. You've got to keep the place beautiful and healthy for your next generation. That was always a strong ethic of this community. But it's not a utopia—we may be a model, but we're riddled with contradictions of class, of gender, of race. But I do think it's a model that has worked well for thousands of years. And I think [that's because there's] basically one difference in the rules: individual versus mutual-reliance interests. If we can learn to have a conversation about which of those models we want to be the basis of our economic paradigm, we're going to be forced to conclude it ain't capitalism! I don't know what we would call it, but . . .

DT: Acequiahood? [laughter]

DP: Acequianomics.