**Archaeology & History in Your Backyard**

**Carmen Padilla—Successful business Woman & Curandera**

Hello Everyone! This is Archaeology and History in Your Backyard and my name is Dixie. X 88.7 FM and the Torrance County Archaeological Society are pleased to bring you a series of programs designed to acquaint you, our listening audience with little known people, places and events that took place in the past, right here in your own backyard. For the most part, we will be covering interesting facts, stories and legends about the past, and people that lived right here in the Estancia Valley and surrounding areas in central New Mexico. Our goal is to inform, educate, and possibly enlist your help in preserving and protecting our past.

Our show today will focus on Mountainair resident Carmen Padilla, who ran the El Charro Café and was also a certified curandera and mid-wife for fifty-five years.

This program was written by Dixie Boyle and produced by Bill Simms. Thank you for joining us today.

In the early years of the 20th Century, curanderas and mid-wives were often times the only medical services available for those living in isolated areas of the country. These women were highly respected for their skills. They diagnosed all types of illnesses and conducted home-births and took care of other medical issues by successfully using herbal and home remedies.

During the first half of the 1900s, there were 800 practicing curanderas and mid-wives throughout the state of New Mexico. Curanderas were typically middle aged grandmothers, mothers or aunts. These positions were traditionally passed down from one relative to another and being chosen as a curandera was not only an honor but carried a lot of responsibility as well. These women also served as confidants and advisers to the community.

A prominent and well-respected curandera and mid-wife was Carmen Padilla of Mountainair. Padilla was born in Punta de Agua, lived on a ranch near Progresso, later moved to Magdalena and then returned to Mountainair where she spent the remainder of her life. She was an exceptional woman for her time. She assisted her first husband Paul in running their small grocery business where they also sold coats, pant, shoes and penny candy. Carmen would later start her own eating establishment named the El Charro Café. She was not afraid to speak her mind, had a tattoo, did a little bootlegging during the depression years and served as a registered mid-wife and curandera for fifty-five years. She claimed to have delivered over one hundred babies.

Diana Ballejos Chavez remembers going with “Grandma Carmen” when she delivered babies. She stated in an interview, “When we were little we got to go with Grandma Carmen when she had to deliver a baby. It was fun when there were other kids to play with, but when it was a first-time baby we were on our own. We had to stay outside, didn’t get fed until the baby was born and it was a good thing many people still had outhouses.”

It would not be until the 1950s when women began having their babies in hospitals in any numbers, and Carmen and her colleagues were often called upon to deliver an endless stream of babies. Her granddaughter told about the long distances these curanderas had to travel. “They went all over—Edgewood, Moriarty, Monte Pireto, Lucy, Willard, even to Torreon—after one delivery in Torreon they had to stay at our house because they were so tired—that delivery took a long time.”

When Paul Padilla passed away of a heart attack in 1949, it left Carmen with little means of support. Being innovative and hard working, she decided to close the grocery store and renovate that portion of the building into a home and convert the back portion into apartments. She rented to locals, transients, and those needing a room for the night while in town. Since there were already sixteen grocery stores in town during this era in Mountainair’s history, Carmen made more money with her rentals and had less headaches.

Carmen also rented the café to others wanting to operate a restaurant. Other times she opened the café after community dances when people would stop in to eat her homemade tortillas, bowls of chili, Mexican food, hamburgers and more before heading home at the end of the evening. She sold bootleg whisky on the side for those wanting something stronger, which was expected of business owners during these years.

From all reports, Carmen Padilla was a dedicated curandera who often researched new remedies and learned to mix herbs and prepare poultices that were beneficial to her patients. According to those who knew her, during the years she worked as a curandera she was constantly mixing and preparing herbs or tending her herb garden. She trained several of her nieces who were later chosen as curanderas.

A curandera began her studies as a young girl by learning herbal remedies and how to cultivate the plants needed to heal. Practicing curanderas knew which medicinal plants to gather for most ailments in the wild. Carmen had her own herb garden of course, but she also traded with other curanderas and exchanged recipes and remedies and went on herb gathering expeditions in the nearby Manzano Mountains.

Curanderas and mid-wives are credited with saving many lives on the American frontier, as they knew as much as many of the early doctors treating the sick plus medical supplies were not always readily available in rural and isolated portions of the country. Many of the early medical doctors also depended upon many of these early herbal remedies.

The use of curanderas and mid-wives in New Mexico is once again on the rise in New Mexico. Maybe because of the expensive price tag on modern health care many are returning to the old ways which in some cases might even work better. The legacy left behind by curanderas like Carmen Padilla and others who sacrificed much of their comfort to help others on the frontier. They were respected and hard-working women who took their profession seriously, not only helping their patients with medical problems but they also gave them advice as well. They had to study and pass different certification examinations and take renewal classes in order to update their knowledge. They were trusted by the people they served and a good part of the time their diagnosis turned out to be correct. They sincerely cared about the people they served as they were serving their friends, relatives and neighbors.

This has been Archaeology and History in Your Backyard, a series that will take you through our area’s history in future episodes.

The Torrance County Archaeological Society meets at 7 PM the first Tuesday of every month from March through November. We meet at the East Torrance Soil and Water Education Building at 700 S. 10th Street in Estancia. Please come and join us.

You can listen to Archaeology and History in Your Backyard Tuesday at 7 PM, Thursday at 12:15 PM and Saturday at 4 PM. Thanks for listening!

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