

The History of Agriculture in the Corrales Valley



This is the text drafted for the sign in front of the Village Municipal Complex. Mary Davis and Sayre Gerhardt compiled this from various texts, mostly interviews and memoirs at the Corrales Historical Society archives, but also from Pauline Eisenstadt's interviews in her book. They did not create a bibliography and Sayre just wanted to acknowledge that they relied on other people's work when compiling this history.

The Corrales Valley, a part of the floodplain of the Rio Grande, is some of the richest agricultural land in New Mexico. For hundreds of years farming was a way of life in Corrales. The livelihood of the residents of this valley was completely dependent upon the river for irrigation of the fields in this semi-arid land.

The ancient Tiguex Indians first inhabited this narrow strip of fertile land. At least two Pueblo ruins have been located in the Corrales Valley, and archaeological reports indicate that these settlements appear to span approximately four centuries of sedentary village development. The Native Americans grew small-cobbed corn, beans, squash, melons, gourds and, perhaps, cotton as well. Corn was boiled or roasted and eaten off the cob, ground into meal and cooked as mush or baked into thin, flat tortillas.

After the Spanish had conquered the region, Captain Juan Gonzales Bas, who had bought the Alameda Land Grant on which Corrales stands from Francisco Montes Vigil in 1712, settled the Corrales Valley. Corrales, the Spanish word meaning corrals, probably derived its name from the livestock containment pens used to contain domestic animals that grazed in the valley. Captain Gonzales most likely grazed cattle, horses and sheep on his lands, which included the valley and the lands on the mesa to the west.

The old Corrales acequia was dug early in the 18th century to irrigate fields and gardens. The winding route of the old Corrales acequia loosely followed the natural contours of the valley, and allowed flooding of the land to both east and west sides of the ditch. The Spanish introduced new food crops, including wheat and barley; wheat was commonly grown along the Rio Grande until the 1930s, resulting in the use of flour tortillas in New Mexican cuisine. Vegetables such as onions, lettuce, radishes, and cabbage were introduced, as were chile and new varieties of beans from Mexico. 17th century missionaries brought fruit trees and grape vines to the valley.

Subsistence farming was the primary occupation through much of the 1800s. During Spanish times, there was little incentive to produce a surplus for there were no nearby commercial markets. The Federal Census of 1870 describes most adult residents of Corrales as farmers, farm laborers or housekeepers. Farms often produced most of what they would need; yet villagers depended on each other and nearby Indian pueblos to help during harvest, to share fresh meat from a butchered animal, and to trade produce for greater variety of fruits and vegetables. While commercial agriculture took hold in the late 1800s in the Corrales valley, this pattern of self-sufficient small landholders continued well into the 20th century. During the Great Depression, old-timers recalled times sure were difficult, but Corrales had plenty to eat because everyone raised their own food. They canned in one-half gallon jars, kept dried fruit and vegetables and had cows for dairy products.

After Mexico won its independence from Spain in 1821 and later when New Mexico became a U.S. territory in 1848, markets expanded. The American takeover also opened New Mexico to new settlers, and European farmers from Italy and France began to settle in the Corrales Valley in the 1860s.

In the 1870s, newcomers expanded the cultivation of Mission grapes for wine, adding a wide variety of California wine grapes. Ernest L. Alary, grandson of Louis Alary, a settler from the Bordeaux area of France, provides a recollection of the family's experiences:

By 1900 the farm was known as the Alary Wine Ranch. Louis Alary and his two sons, August and Emile, had acquired acreage adjoining the original farm. This enabled them to increase their acreage of grapes, Malvoisie being the main variety planted. In 1903 the Albuquerque Journal carried this news item. Alary and Sons of Los Corrales yesterday installed a 172 gallon still for the manufacture of grape brandy. The grape crop is very large this year and the Alary Wine Ranch is one of the oldest in the Valley. The following year, 1904, they suffered a serious setback when the Rio Grande flooded the area the first day of harvest. The first two wagonloads of grapes harvested were to be on their way to a customer in Albuquerque at 4:00 AM, however, at 2:00 AM the Rio Grande went over its bank, flooding the whole Valley. Their homes were lost; the harvest was at an end. Not even the two loads were delivered. Water remained in the area for months, resulting in their being unable to cover the vines for protection from the cold, which consequently resulted in severe damage to the vines, and no crop in 1905. They rebuilt their homes and renewed the vineyards in a few years. By 1910 Louis had turned the farm over to his two sons, August and Emile. The two sons now had sons who were becoming involved in the operation. In 1912 they decided to set up a sizeable winery and small distillery. August and Emile took three friends into the partnership, one being a wine making expert. They installed a 250-gallon still to make grape brandy and acquired many large wooden vats for making wine. The attempts by the expert at making champagne and port were failures. Gallonage losses of wine were very high and combined with other failures, soon brought an end to the winery. The vineyard at this time amounted to 54 acres.

Vines were planted at a 6-foot by 6-foot spacing, resulting in approximately 1,200 to the acre. They were cultivated by horse pulled cultivators as the tractor was not available in the earlier years, and even by the early thirties, the tractor was not a common farm implement in the Corrales area. Weed control was very essential and the vineyards were cultivated and hand hoed around the vines, several times during the growing season. The runners also had to be pruned back about twice a year during the growing season. This practice was accomplished by the use of a hand sickle. After harvest, soil was plowed toward the vines partially covering them, and then workers with shovels completed the covering of the vines. Covering the vines with soil was required to protect them from damaging low temperatures, zero degrees or lower, which occurred in at least four out of five years. Vines were not grown on sires and posts because of the difficulty of covering the vines. A cultivator with a 2 x 4 five feet in length attached to two of the shanks was used to level off and pack the soil. The soil was not disturbed again until the danger of frost was over in mid May. Vines were pruned twice. The first pruning took out dead, old wood and unwanted canes. The second was performed when the buds swelled and was based on the number of buds to be left on the canes. All of these practices necessary to grow grapes required a very substantial amount of hand labor. At harvest time, due to the short time grapes have to be harvested with optimum wine making qualities, a large number of pickers were necessary. Local residents were always available and eager to work during the spring, summer and late fall, however at harvest they were also harvesting their own crops, and many were not available to pick grapes. Fortunately the Sandia Indians lived across the river and at grape picking time they went to Sandia Pueblo and even though it was also their harvest time, their leader would summon his people and designate who was to pick grapes. It was a family affair as the women and teenage boys came over to pick grapes. They waded across the river at dawn, singing and shouting, happy and eager to pick the grapes.

For 50 or so years, Corrales became known for its vineyards and the making of wine, brandy, and during Prohibition, whiskey. The grape growing began to disappear in the 1930s. One farmer attributed this to the rising water table, too much alkali in the soil, which lessened the sugar content and quality of the grapes, the California competition, and the Great Depression. Later growers cite the lowering of the water table by reclamation projects, and years of hard freezes for the loss of their vineyards. Today, grape growing and winemaking are having a comeback in Corrales and elsewhere in New Mexico. New vines are added to existing and new fields in the Village each year.

In another commercial venture, in 1919, Alejandro Gonzales, a descendant of Captain Gonzales, pioneered the celery industry in New Mexico. He was extremely successful and became known as the Celery King. In 1924, he sent President Coolidge a box of Corrales celery for his Christmas dinner! Gonzales was lauded for his innovative farming as well as his advocacy of the formation of farmers' cooperatives to more effectively grade and market crops.

The first commercial apple orchard was planted possibly as early as the 1890s. But it was the decline of the vineyards and the reclamation of lands by the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District in the 1930s, which spurred the planting of orchards in Corrales. By the 1940s much of the land west of the old Corrales acequia and the cleared Bosque lands closer to the river were covered with orchards. More than 12 varieties of apples were planted. The apple crop continues to the present day, with orchards being maintained at the Alary Farm, the Curtis-Losack Farm, and at Wagner Farms.

The first English family to move to Corrales was the Thompson family, who lived at the far north end of the Corrales valley at the headquarters of the Alameda Cattle Company. In 1923 the Thompson brothers purchased 55,000 acres of the common grazing land on the mesa where Rio Rancho is now located. The ranch herded 3,000 to 5,000 Herefords and also had about 150 thoroughbred horses. The Thompson ranch represented the frontier west cattle ranch, as compared with the common grazing lands for cattle and sheep by the earlier Spanish settlers. The sale of the ranch in the 1950s, which later become one of the largest residential developments in the country in the 1970s, brought the growth of the Albuquerque area to the mesa overlooking the fertile Corrales Valley, creating what is now a green oasis within suburban sprawl.

Today, few Corrales residents derive their living from the land, yet agricultural traditions continue to define the character of the community and to play a key role in the village culture and economy. Many landowners, including descendants of the old families as well as recent arrivals, continue to farm even though the land value has far exceeded its market value as farmland. These suburban farms and gardens are still irrigated by the traditional acequias, and crops grown include chile, corn, alfalfa, hay, melons, cabbages, pumpkins, apples and grapes. Tree nurseries and commercial flower gardens are more modern crops for the urban markets. Many residents enjoy growing their own vegetables and fruits, and corrals and pastures continue to support many horses as well as other livestock, including sheep, goats, cattle and llamas. In the fall, the smell of roasting chile fills the air, and fresh cider is shared with neighbors.

"Everybody had a farm and everybody was self-sufficient, living off the land. But they all helped one another at harvest time. There was no farm machinery to speak of, so they all joined in harvesting each other's fields. When a pig was butchered, the fresh meat was shared with every other family in the valley. Fifteen days down the line, somebody else would kill a pig and you'd share in that, too."

--Tony Garcia, from Meeting of Corrales Minds program, 9/29/99

"My family has always had cattle and sheep back from my great grandfather, Facundo Gonzalez."

--Antonio Jose Gonzalez, born June 18, 1820 in Corrales.

"Before Prohibition came, we used to have a still and made the best grape brandy. When Prohibition struck, we had two choices: sell the farm, or become bootleggers. My husband served some time because of it, but I'm proud because we did what we had to do to survive."

--Roberta Targhetta, interview for The Observer, 8/20/86

"Beginning in the 1940s as a part of the Extension Service programs, many of the Corrales growers and children entered their produce, canned goods, animals and various crafts at the State Fair. Corrales farmer Ida Salce Gutierrez received over 600 ribbons for her entries over the years, more than anyone in the State, and made a blanket from her ribbons!"

--Evelyn Salce Curtis Losack, Ida's niece