

LA MATANZA - A Hispanic Tradition by Donald Chavez y Gilbert
Origins of The First American Cowboys. Chapter 4

La Matanza, ("the killing," of any butcher animal, but, traditionally of a hog), in this part of the country, (New Mexico) has been a traditional, annual event since the coming of such early Spanish and Portuguese explorers as Juan de Onate and Coronado over four hundred years ago.

Its purpose was originally a harvest of meat in the fall or winter after the pigs or hogs had sufficient time to grow to between three and six hundred pounds. Over time, it, (La Matanza), became an integral part of the Hispanic culture in every village; a social ritual that transcended its original purpose of feeding us to the equally important job of preserving and maintaining the lifelong bonds of immediate and extended family. Moreover, because it was such a big job and frequently yielded in excess of one to two hundred pounds of Manteca, (lard), Matanzas became the social adhesive, which helped to unite and bond together whole communities.

The Pre-Columbian history and significance of "La Matanza" goes back even further, tracing the tradition to the Iberian Peninsula in Spain, thousands of years since humans first began domesticating animals for food. The Celts arrived in what is now Spain, in 1300 B.C. The early name of Spain, "Iberia", is Celtic and is derived from their word "aber", or "open" as it translates in Spanish, meaning "harbor" or "river". The name is also very common in the Peninsula as a "Castilian" name. Celts prized their livestock, and pigs were important enough livestock for the Celts to carve granite statues in the image of pigs to be used as tombstones and territorial markers

During the time when Spain was under Moorish rule, between 711A.D. and 1492, the word for pig more with greater frequency came to be known as "*Marrano*," the etymology of which evolved from an Arabic root meaning "prohibited thing," or "outsider." Pork is commonly known to be outside or prohibited from the diet of Arab, (Moor's), culture and religion. Being that Spaniards prized pork it was a natural for taking on symbolic significance as an icon of Christian Spanish political and religious resistance against their oppressors. Enter La Matanza and the pig became the perfect line of delineation separating the Christian Spaniards from their conquerors. So La Matanza took on new meaning becoming not just a tradition and occasion of family feast, but, moreover, a tradition for Catholic Spain persevering almost eight centuries, finally defeating the Moors in January 1492 and then, with religious momentum later, issuing an edict to expel the Jews.

Like many other cultural traditions knowing how and where you fit into the chronology of history plays a major role in how we develop our self-concept and sense of self worth. So it is in the Hispanic community in New Mexico and Valencia County in particular. Over the years and decades, Matanzas helped us children conceptualize who we were. As we acquired greater responsibility, from year to year so did we become increasingly comfortable and proud of whom we ultimately saw every morning in the bathroom mirror. Unlike times in our country during beginning and middle part of the last century when there really were people who did not have enough to eat, today when half of all children in the country will be separated from one of their parents by the age of eighteen, when youth gangs, rather than elder patrons rule the streets we can reflect in retrospect, and see now that more than a family feeding event, matanzas were part of a greater cultural process of self conceptualization, of becoming a healthy well adjusted adult. Each Matanza was an event sometimes two years in the making, as two years is about the period needed for hogs to reach optimal weight. Family members were trained and delegated responsibilities based on their age and station in the family unit, beginning with daily feeding all the way up to the expert bleeding and butcher skills needed the day of the killing, (matanza).

Generally, the older men consisted of the killing crew and butchering
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large cuts of meat. The women prepared the many other aspects of cooking as if they did it day in and day out, cutting carnitas, chicharones, chopping potatoes and onions, cooking beans, chile, Posole, tortillas, etc.

Final preparations were made in November or December the day before La Matanza when water was hauled in buckets from a hand drilled well or nearby acequia, (irrigation ditch), to fill fifty

gallon drums. The drums were placed over a pit where a large enough fire could be ignited to bring the barrels of water to a boil. When I was a child, people arrived at Matanzas in waves. Depending on your specific role or responsibility determined when you arrived. When I was an adolescent, I was old enough to take responsibility for keeping the water barrels full and boiling and ensuring a flow of hot water buckets to the men scraping off the hair. There is something about feeding a fire that seems to fascinate most youngsters and for me it was a legitimate and well-supervised reason for us youngsters to play with the object of our fascination. However, I was not seasoned enough to do the bleeding or butchering. I would have to get my practice beginning with cutting strips of lonja. Nonetheless, I was quite content with my place in what I knew to be the natural order of things: our own food chain. I knew who I was in the greater scheme of my community and that grounded and centered me.

As a society, we are just recently beginning to understand how knowing who we were in the social big picture was more important than the original purpose of feeding ourselves.

A little before daybreak the fire was started and while the water was heated to a boil, the hog was brought to the butcher site only a few feet away from the fire. Our family used a slatted wood table not too far from the fire, the table elevated above a hole in the ground or pit excavated such that unwanted parts and blood could easily drain and collect without getting under foot. The second wave or the killing crew arrived at dawn and killed the hog. In earlier days, the patriarch or grandfather would strike the hog with a heavy hammer or heel of an axe between the eyes. Then, while the hog was unconscious, and knowing just where to cut, grandpa either severed a jugular artery or the heart always careful to catch the draining blood in a pan the make blood pudding or morcilla. I remember always being afraid for the hog as only us humans can dread death. It was a sad yet righteous moment when I believe we all silently paid homage to the hog for her sacrifice. It was a time of death that for us children put life in a perspective that just does not come from buying sliced ham at the supermarket or a burger at McDonalds. This is one aspect I think I wish to change in future Matanzas. That is to make that private little homage prayer an out loud prayer so that there is no question about the meaning of the hog's sacrifice, and the meaning of the whole Matanza ritual in our long Hispanic roots.