

## Voices of Dixon: Emma Atencio

From the book  
**Voices of Dixon:**  
**Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley**  
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass  
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### **Emma Atencio**

(b. 1929)

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Retired Dental Assistant  
Teacher's Aide & Nurse's Aide  
Interviewed May 28, 2003

"I'll never forget the day we moved."

I was the second of twelve surviving children born to Demetria Mascareñas Roybal and Maxmiliano Roybal. My father was born in Peñasco and my mother in Wagon Mound. I was born in Rio Lucio on what is now Picuris Pueblo land. You know those adobes you see as you turn into the reservation, the ones that are falling down? Well, I was born in a corner of a room in one of those houses on December 5, 1929, and we lived there until I was about five years old. Then those families traded their houses and land with the Pueblo for land across the river so that the Picuris Pueblo people would all be together on the reservation.

I don't remember much about the house, but I'll never forget the day we moved. Everybody was moving by wagon up the old dirt

road to Rio Lucio. None of the farmers had cars then (1935). The only person in Peñasco with a car was Fecundo Medina who owned the general store which was right across from the Catholic Church. I just recently saw an old picture of him in a church procession in the museum in Santa Fe.

Anyway, it was summer and I was barefoot and standing in the farm wagon with everything we owned, including a little metal crib (which my youngest sister still has). Then our horse started pulling our wagon down that dirt road. We had hardly gone any distance when a wheel hit a rock. The jolt lifted the metal crib and landed it on my big toe! Oh, it hurt so! I can almost feel it right now, almost seventy years later. And I remember the nail coming out. I'll never forget that day!

"The farm gave us all we needed."

My parents used to grow everything, everything. We grew our own corn, our own wheat, alfalfa hay. We had chickens, geese, turkeys, cows, everything under the sun. We never had to buy food except coffee and sugar. We had all the meat we wanted, eggs, butter, milk, cottage cheese. My mom made her own posole, her own chicos, even her own soap. I remember my dad going fishing in the river with a net. He would catch so much fish that there was enough for my mom and all the neighbors to can.

We picked peas and my mom used to can them, too. And what she didn't can, she would dry. We didn't have freezers then. She would peel the cantaloupe and honey melons and then put holes in the pieces and we would string them to dry. Now they use dehydrators, but I still dry my apples with the sun. You can dry anything: mushrooms, bananas—nothing is impossible. We had a lot of plums and chokecherries and a few apples. People didn't have many apples in Peñasco because it's too cold. But we would trade. My dad would come down here to Dixon, or people from here would go up there and they would trade wheat and corn and chicos for fruit and calabazas, the big pumpkins. We didn't have money, but we had

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all we needed to eat and we had lots to trade. That's why I say we were rich; we were not poor. And when my father did go out to work in the mines in Colorado and in Montana and would be gone a large part of the year, my mother and all of us would take care of the farm.

We used to plow with horses, and then plant. We used to hoe and irrigate. We would even cut the wheat when it was harvest time. And then stand it up. We didn't cut the hay and the alfalfa by hand; they hired somebody to do that. But we would take the hay into the barn in the wagon. My dad made a crib on the wagon so the hay wouldn't slide down. I remember one time we were tossing the hay up to a platform with pitchforks. The platform was made of latillas. We would get up on the platform and then throw the hay into the barn. Only this time the latillas opened and I fell down into the barn. (Laughs) I had a lot of mishaps. But I didn't ever hurt myself.

The fun part that I really liked was at night. We would take blankets out and put them over a big pile of straw and put another blanket over us and put a whole bunch of straw on that. And then the neighbors and my cousins would sleep there, looking at the stars and telling stories—it was so beautiful! I will never forget that.

“We would toss the wheat in the air.”

After harvest, dad would make a large area with no weeds and wet it down. We called it la era. Then he would bring in the goats and get them to go round and round and then round and round the other way until they had flattened it. When it was dry it was like a table. When the wheat was ready, we would bring the wheat to this round, hard place on the ground, and then the horses would trample the wheat until it was all separated from the straw. Then with pitchforks we would take out the straw and put it all around on the ground and the wheat would be in the middle. We would then toss the wheat in the air to separate the grains from the chaff until it was really clean. Then we would put it into gunny sacks, or any kind of sacks we had, and we would travel all the way to the mill in Vadito to have the wheat ground. We would leave the wheat and when it

was done—there were no phones then, but somehow we knew—we would ride up in the wagon and bring home a thousand pounds of flour, which would last us for a year.

“We had to cross the log bridge.”

To get to my dad's house, which is now my brother's, you drive across the bridge. But when I was young, there was no bridge, just a log. We had to cross that log to go to school in Rio Lucio. That's the only time we crossed. Otherwise we played up on the mountain. We would make little houses of rocks and wood and tin cans. You know, some of them are still there.

Sometimes there was so much water, I would stand there and look at the water and get dizzy. Then we would get down on our hands and knees and crawl across the log. My mother told us to be careful, but she never watched. Maybe she had so much faith that she knew we would not fall in. We used to stand on that bridge and watch the water until we felt we were going, going, going. Now my sisters and I think about the log bridge and how God really took care of us. Nothing ever happened when we crossed that bridge.

But one time, early in the spring when the ice on the river was starting to thaw, I got into real trouble. I was coming home from school with a neighbor boy whose name was Nelson. Well, we were jumping and horsing around at the river and I stepped in a place where I thought the ice was solid. But it wasn't. The ice broke and I fell into the freezing water. I tried to get out, but I couldn't. And then I went under the ice. I'll never forget that. That was the scariest thing that ever happened to me. Then Nelson grabbed my hand, and he pulled me out. If he hadn't been there, I probably would have frozen. I was eight years old.

In the winter when the snow was very deep, my dad would get out the sleigh and take us to the road to catch the school bus. He had a big ranch and it was a long way from the house to the road. Sometimes there was so much ice and snow on the river that the horses would pull us across. When it was really cold the snow would

be so hard we could walk across the fields without sinking in.

“We worked on the ranches like migrant workers.”

While I was in high school, we used to go work on the ranches in Colorado like migrant workers. We would work in the potato fields, the peas, the onions, lettuce. We did that before school started. We would all go, all the big kids. We worked from sunrise to sundown. But it was fun, too, you know. We worked and looked forward to the weekends to go to town to a movie. And not only did we do it, but also our cousins and neighbors in Rio Lucio and Peñasco. That was the only work then. And we also would go with people from Dixon, too. Ruth Archuleta, the in-laws and Gonzaleses, and other people from Dixon. I don't know who would hire the whole gang, but somebody did. (Laughs) And they would take us in big trucks. We would work in La Jara and in Fort Garland, Alamosa, La Junta, Monte Vista. My mother would cook for our family. They would pay her to do the cooking. My neighbor here—she's also from Peñasco--still remembers when my mom would cook. She baked the best pies.

We went during the harvest, in late August and September. As a matter of fact, we would miss a week of school.

*And this was after you had already harvested your own crops here?*

Yes. Then we would go and make money. I remember when we were working in the onion fields. What you had to do was pull out the onions and put them in a row like this (gestures). Then somebody would come with crates and set them in the rows. We would cut off stems and put the onions in the crates. You got paid by the crate. I don't remember how much we got paid. (There's a lot of things I don't remember in my life. But there's also a lot I do remember.)

We would go to church on Sunday and then in the afternoon or at night we would go to the movies. The farms furnished housing for all the workers. And we would walk to the movies. They had nice houses. We had our own rooms. We didn't have to pay rent. And with the money we earned, we would come home and buy clothes,

buy shoes, buy pencils and everything we needed for school.

“I liked working with people.”

I graduated from Peñasco High School in May of 1947. Friends of my dad wanted me to go to college, but I didn't want to. I guess I wasn't meant to. My dad talked to Pete Sahd (owner of the Peñasco general store) about finding a job for me, and he recommended me to the Embudo hospital. They let me know—it must have been a letter because we didn't have a telephone—and I got a job right away as a nurse's aide. I worked there four years. I loved the work. After that I didn't even think of going to college. I liked working with people and I still do.

“My whole life changed.”

And then I met Max Atencio who was from Dixon and we got married and we lived in this same house, my father-in-law's house. We were married two years and then Max went to look for work in Utah. He got a job there and I still lived here. Then my father-in-law got real sick. My sister-in-law called Max and told him and he started back. He got into a bad accident. Three of the guys in the car were killed. Max survived, but he was disabled, forever. And that changed my whole life.

Max had a blood clot in his brain. He was paralyzed on one side. And on the side that was not paralyzed, he had broken his elbow. So he couldn't bend the elbow. Oh God, can you imagine? He was so young; he was only twenty-two and I was twenty-one. And he had never had a real job; his dad owned the school bus and he drove it. He didn't have any social security. He didn't have anything to help, so he had to apply for state help.

Max had to relearn how to walk, how to eat. Because he couldn't bend his elbow, he made a long spoon so he could eat by himself. He made another long tool so he could shave himself. He did everything he could so as not to burden me with having to do things for him. He

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limped, but he could walk. His elbow never turned, but he drove. He did a whole bunch of things by himself.

After working at the hospital, I worked as a teacher's aide in the Dixon school for about a year. You know the story of the Dixon case, about the nuns teaching in the public school? I was working there then. I worked for about a year under Eulogio Ortega when he was principal. Then I was transferred to Velarde. The teachers' aides are transferred in the district to wherever there was a need. After that I was transferred to Española. Then I heard that a new dentist was coming to Dixon and he needed help so I decided to apply. No sooner did I decide to put in my application than he called me for an interview. And he hired me right there. I think he wanted someone who was mature and had work experience.

“His offices had been a second home.”

I started with Dr. Padberg the very first day he opened. We planned everything, we put everything together. I retired three years ago, but I still go over there and I see my initials on a lot of things; boxes, files. The place had been a second home for me; when I worked at the hospital, we boarded there, we lived there. Our rooms are now the operatories of Dr. Padberg. The office of Dr. Padberg was where the housemother stayed at the hospital. That little window into his waiting room was where the boys would come and ask for their girl friends. They had to sign in and out. Wasn't that amazing? And on weekdays we had to be in by ten o'clock and on weekends by twelve. Otherwise the housemother would lock the door.

One room was used by Olivia Montoya, who was the lab technician. All the other rooms were for the nurses' aides. And believe it or not, most of us were from Peñasco. The nurses lived in the other buildings behind the hospital. All those are now owned by Siete del Norte. Dr. Bowen and her sister lived in one building. The other doctors in another. And the nurses. Everybody who worked in the hospital lived there.

Dr. Bowen delivered all my children. And I named the daughter

you just met after Dr. Bowen, Sarah.

*How were you trained as a dental assistant?*

Dr. Padberg had bought the dental practice from Dr. Payne. The girl who was Dr. Payne's assistant stayed on for two weeks and trained me some. It took forever to learn all the names of the instruments and how to read the x-rays and everything else. I learned in the school of doing. After the assistant left I learned from Dr. Padberg what he needed. Then I would leave one instrument aside and write down its name so I would know it next time. Now I could probably do everything and find everything with my eyes closed. And I could probably do most of the things he does. You learn by doing, you learn everything. In the beginning, before he had a hygienist, Dr. Padberg used to clean teeth and I would polish them, which was fun!

“My life changed three times.”

Max lived to be sixty-four. He died from cirrhosis of the liver, which was diagnosed as coming from the blood transfusions after the accident. The blood was not screened. How come that happened when the transfusions took place so long ago? We were told that little by little that blood ate up his liver.

I told the story about Max and the accident to one of my nephews. I said I had changes in my life three times. Why, how? First was when I got married. That's a big change in your life! Then when Max was in that accident, my life had to completely change. And when Max died (twelve years ago), that was another change. But here I am. I have my kids here. They help me. I help them. I have a daughter who is a family nurse practitioner. Another daughter is a teacher. And my daughter Sarah, who lives in that trailer behind my house, will be running the new little restaurant in Dixon, Café Corazon. That used to be Crucita's place, the daughter of my friend Ruth. Crucita told Sarah, “I want you to have this place because I have known your mother forever.” And she has. Her mother, Ruth,

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and I have been friends for fifty years. We're like family. She's also from Peñasco. We think the same and we act the same. And I'll help Sarah in the restaurant. I'll make tortillas. That will be another career.

"I thought it was time to retire."

After twenty-five years working as a dental assistant, I thought it was time to retire, before I got too old, while I could still drive and enjoy my life, see things, visit family and friends. Last summer I visited St. Martin in the Virgin Islands. I went to Guatemala with my daughter, the one who is a nurse; she's on the Health International medical team. The people in Guatemala were very generous. Slow-moving, and very kind. I felt as though I were at home in Peñasco. I've also been to Jamaica and Mexico.

I like to work outdoors. We have a garden. I like to can and dry foods. I'm always busy. I grow grapes and sell them to the winery in Velarde. I always used to give them away, and then I said, What am I doing? So the last two years we've sold them to the winery. We also grow apples and peaches and apricots. And I just have this little garden for myself, right there (points). I grow so many flowers! All those little green things will be cosmos. They grow so beautiful by themselves. I irrigate from Acequia del Llano. My neighbors and I share the same lateral to bring the water down from the acequia.

"I welcome everybody into my house."

Lots of things have changed. When I was growing up, people showed respect for everybody. And now they call everybody *tu*, like in English, you, whether you're old or young. In Spanish we used to say *Usted* as sign of respect, for an elder, or a teacher, or a priest. And now it's *tu, tu, tu*, you, you, you, for everybody.

To me, people in Peñasco are different from people here in Dixon. I have lived here since 1950, but I still feel the same as I did when I lived in Peñasco and I do what I did then. I welcome

everybody into my house. I always feed them, I always have food to offer them. Or I give them a little something before they leave. People here don't do those things. You know, Ruth and I were just talking about that and we agreed that there are differences in the ways people live. I don't know how to describe it. Up in Peñasco we were all farmers and we used to help each other out. When we brought in our corn from the fields we had, Eee! great piles of corn. I even have pictures of that. All the neighbors would come in and take the husks off and throw the corn into a pile in the corner and do what was needed. Those are the changes I see. Here, now, people do their own thing. They don't seem to offer help to anybody. You know, you see somebody struggling,

doing something, or even kids—we used to help everybody. My mom used to come to Dixon and we would come with her to help her cousin do the canning. And they would come to help us. Those are big changes.

And then you didn't have to pay anybody to help you. You would just help because you felt good about it. And that's how I still feel. I went to a friend's house yesterday and the sink was full of dishes and I just washed them! (Laughs) I cleaned the stove, and did everything. And I help Ruth. I just go and offer my help. If they don't want it, that's fine. I just feel good about doing it. And I see a few other people do the same thing. But not very many. When you give, you receive.

*What do you feel is the reason for this difference between Dixon and Peñasco? Is it because Dixon is closer to the city, to Los Alamos and Santa Fe, and people from here go off to work in the city? And the people in Peñasco are closer to the country?*

Maybe. People here go more to the city. And a lot of people have moved to the city. And then some of them have moved back. People who have lived in the city have changed their lives and they behave differently. My daughter Sarah is one who moved to the city and I saw changes in her when she moved back. That's what I mean. You

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get used to other friends and other ways.

*How would you say family life has changed, especially for women?*

I had to work and run the house because of our situation. But in earlier times women with children didn't work outside the home. My mother had fourteen children. Two died and she raised twelve. She worked so hard all her life, taking care of the kids and running the farm while my father was away working. And then she got cancer and died young. She was sixty-eight. My dear mother. Nowadays people have it too easy. Years ago the husband and wife would go out together. Now I see women go out on their own and men go out on their own.

“Forgiveness and peace have to start at home.”

My seven sisters and four brothers are all alive. Usually in October we have a very large pizza dinner to celebrate every October birthday. We make twenty or twenty-five pizzas in my sister Dorothy's horno, in Velarde. We have a lot of fun with the kids, grand kids, great grand kids, and all the brothers and sisters and in-laws.

I have a good attitude toward anything that comes my way. Why get angry? Why get mad? Why get depressed? You have to deal with whatever happens, big or small. And when you pat your friend on the shoulder, or give someone you don't know a smile, it doesn't cost anything and it makes people feel good about you, or about themselves. Your attitude makes your life. If you have a bad attitude and hold anger and dislike, it's bad for you. I'm not saying there wasn't friction or conflict when I was growing up, but we didn't hold grudges. Nowadays some get mad at a sister or brother and never see them again. I don't ever remember getting mad at any of my relatives and then not speaking to them. And I have many relatives, hundreds. You have disagreements, but you forgive and forget. Maybe that's why people stay mad at each other: they don't know how to forgive. And if you don't forgive, you can't forget. And that extends

everywhere. There's war right here in families and then the big wars in the world. We could start here, at home, putting an end to violence and hatred. It (peace) has to start here, in small groups, and then get bigger and bigger. That's what I think. Because the violence starts at home.

*Do you watch television?*

My granddaughter watches cartoons. I like to watch the discovery channel and the history channel. I watch the news, but sometimes I don't want to watch it. I watch the 700 channel, Pat Robertson. Sometimes he prays with you. There's a mass at 6:30 in the morning, and I like to watch that. You have to know that there's a higher power that's going to pick you up. There is. And when people don't believe, they don't have moral behavior. Even married women. They don't have pride in themselves. If you respect yourself, everybody else will respect you. That's what I tell my daughters. But if you don't respect yourself, nobody else is going to either. You are number one. You have to take care of yourself. I love you and I care about you, but I am number one. I take care of myself first. Then I can take care of you. Because if I don't take care of myself, I am nothing and I have nothing and I can't do anything. If you don't take responsibility for yourself, how can you take responsibility for your children or your neighbors or whoever?

My mother would tell us the same as we tell our kids today: don't let anybody abuse you or touch you. And if they bother you, just run away, stay away from that person, and tell us. My dad was usually away working, but my mother would tell us. You have to respect your bodies. You have to have good morals. And I taught that to my children. And as I said, they grow up and move away, and they change. I tell them that I may not like what they're doing, but I love them unconditionally.

“I loved to look for eggs.”

I remember looking for eggs in our barn. I always loved to look for eggs. Our chickens laid eggs everywhere. In this corner, that

corner, every corner of the barn. So my mom knew I liked to do it and she said, "Let's let Emma go look for the eggs. That's her job. She likes it." I remember, too, when I was in grade school, we would take eggs to the little store by the school, because we had a lot of eggs, and we would trade them for pencils and paper and candy, whatever. And the store owner would sell the eggs. That was fun! (Laughs) When I go to my sister Dorothy's, I tell them I'm going to look for eggs. They have a big old fence, and the chicken lay wherever. So now they're going to Denver to the graduation of their grand kids and I'm going to Velarde to look for their eggs. And it still is fun. And I loved the work for Dr. Padberg. I still go to work there sometimes. I do the labs two hours a week. And when one or both the dental assistants are sick, I work as a dental assistant.

Somehow what we did growing up worked out. Here we are, seventy-four, still going. It seems like I never got scared of anything then. Now you're scared of somebody hitting you on the highway. Of course there were no cars then. And so many people here have been injured in automobile accidents. We probably wouldn't even have lived here if my husband hadn't been in the accident. He had a good job in Utah. I probably would have gone there with him. But that wasn't meant to be, so we're here, I'm here.