

Voices of Dixon: Clovis Romero

From the book
Voices of Dixon:
Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass
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Clovis Romero

(b. 1933)

Fruit Grower, Embudo

Accountant, NM State Land Office (Retired)

Interviewed December 12, 2002

(Note: Clovis lives in the adobe farmhouse he was born in. He lived here with Nina, his wife, for 37 years; she passed away last spring. His ten-acre orchard has 300 trees and is the largest property irrigated from Acequia Junta y Cienega. Clovis served as a commissioner and treasurer of the Acequia 35 years. All of the property in this area, once part of the Embudo land grant, was settled by just a few families. Many of the current landowners are descendants of those families.)

Relations

Here in Embudo the Romeros, Achuletas, Rendons, and Montoyas are all related. The Rendons are on my mother's side. My great-grandmother was a Montoya. On my Dad's side, his grandmother was Martinez, Alcaria Martinez. The Baca property, by

the Post Office, belonged to my mother's family, the Rendons. She grew up there. The Rendons had property up in Dixon also. My maternal grandmother passed away when my mother and her siblings were very young. My mother was the oldest and I think she was nine. Her father passed away a few years later. So their grandmother, Dolorita Rendon, who owned that property before Tony Baca, brought them up.

Legal papers, which in Spanish are called *cartas de guardián*, designate that in case of death the property belonging to the parents will go to those who raise the orphaned children. That's how my uncle, Frank Archuleta, Alfredo Martinez's father-in-law, ended up with the property in Dixon where Alfredo lives. And then my other uncle, Escolastico Archuleta, and my tia, Perfecta, have the property across from Johnny Martinez's place. That property belonged to my grandfather.

Alfredo's wife Eda is my first cousin. Silviano Romero is also related. Silviano's dad, Fermin, was my father's brother. My father passed away in an automobile accident when I was only eight months old. My mother got help from her mother and her sister, and especially her uncle, her mother's brother, Pablo Rendon. He married late in life so all the time we were growing up he was always helping around the farm, pruning trees and whatever else had to be done.

In 1943 my sister and my brother were in high school in Santa Fe and my mom decided to move there. I was in third grade, the youngest in the family, and my other sister was in fifth grade. I went to St. Francis Catholic School in Santa Fe from the third to the seventh grade. At that time St. Francis School was right across from the Cathedral. Now it's part of La Fonda Hotel parking lot. My sister went to Loreto Academy, which was across the street. My brother went to Santa Fe High and my other sister went to Harrington Junior High, which doesn't exist any more. With the exception of the eighth grade, which I did back here in Dixon, I had all of my schooling in Santa Fe. We lived in practically every part of town. We started on

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Douglas, a little street off Acequia Madre. When I was going to school at St. Francis, I would walk to school in the morning, run back home at noon for lunch, and then go back for the afternoon.

But every summer we would come back here to the farm. You know, with the exception of two summers, in 1954 and 1955 in the Army in Korea, I have spent every summer of my life here on this farm, and I'm sixty-nine. (laughs) When I came back from the service, I went to St. Michael's College, which is now the College of Santa Fe. I studied accounting. Then I went work for the State Land Office and commuted to Santa Fe for 30 years, and did the farming after work and on weekends. Now I'm a full time farmer.

My brother and I planted all the trees in this orchard. He bought them in 1958, most of them, about 300. We filled the whole place with trees. Before that there were just a few trees up here around the house. The rest was irrigated fields and pasture. We planted corn, vegetables, and even wheat. We always had a milk cow and a horse; and of course chickens, a couple of pigs. We grew our own food and we always had enough to eat. My mother would start canning with the first fruit, the cherries. Then the apricots. Even crabapples. She used to put them away whole, with the stems, a little bit of cloves. I remember pulling them out of the jar by the stems. Then of course she used to can a lot of vegetables. When we first went to Santa Fe my mother would send boxes of canned vegetables with me in the bus. My uncle would come too and help unload everything and then take the boxes back.

Changes

I guess the biggest change is that a lot of families have left the area. They ended up in Colorado, Utah, Albuquerque, and California. A lot of people moved to California. They went to work there during the war, their families grew up there, and they never came back. The schools in Dixon used to have a lot of students. Now there's only the public elementary school with about 60 students. There used to be a high school here in Dixon. I think the last class was in 1949. Then

they started busing the students to Española. There were lots more students here than there are now.

People moved away because there were no jobs. Right now, if it weren't for Los Alamos, this area would be in sad shape. And very few people come back. They sold their properties in the 40's when land was very cheap. Now, when they are retired, land is expensive and if they want to come back, they can't afford it. Here in the Embudo area, of all the kids my age that grew up with me, Aaron Maes and myself are the only ones left. Of course there are still the old families, Archuleta, Rendon, Arellano, Medina, Martinez. And in the small villages, Cañoncito and Apodaca, all the people are related. On this acequia, of the 34 parciales, I know I am related to at least eight of the families. (Pauses) No, it's ten. Some are closer than others, however. For example, Michael (Valdez) is my second cousin because his dad is my first cousin. Horacio (Archuleta) is the same; his dad is my first cousin. And further down, Dan Romero's wife Flora is a Montoya, so she's related to me through that family; and also her sister Elvira who lives next door. And Flora and Elvira's brother William also lives there, but he has no water right so he's not part of the acequia. But his daughter is married to Mark Olivas and they are on the acequia.

Acequia Junta y Cienega

Do you see any difference between this acequia, which is the last one taking water from the Rio Embudo, and the eight acequias upstream in the Dixon area?

I think we are about the same as the ones up in Dixon, but we've always been very fortunate with our water. In dry years, like this year, while the upper acequias have had to ration water, we've always had plenty. That's because springs recharge the river just above our heading. We don't know where that spring water comes from, but it's always been there, so far. And in the past, several upstream families have bought property down here to make sure they would have irrigation water.

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Korea

The only two summers of his life that Clovis Romero has not been on his farm were in 1954 and 1955 when he was in the Army in Korea.

I had never traveled anywhere before. As a matter of fact, I had flown in a Piper Cub in Santa Fe but I had never been in a commercial airliner. I had never traveled by train either. When I finished basic training at Fort Bliss, I came home on a 14-day leave, which was called a “delay-en route,” and then we went by train to Fort Lee, Virginia. That was all the way from Albuquerque to Petersburg, Virginia, and it took about three days. It was the first time I had seen any other parts of the country. At Fort Lee I was in a Quartermaster school for eight weeks. Then we got in a plane at Richmond and flew to Seattle, to Fort Lewis. We spent a couple of weeks there in a holding and processing company and then got on a troop ship for Inchon.

There were three thousand men on the ship. We were at sea fourteen days. That was quite an experience. Go to bed, wake up, go to bed, wake up, and all you see is water. And I had never even seen the ocean before. About the fourth day we hit a storm. I was almost in the fantail. We would go down and then when the bow went down you could actually hear the propellers spinning in the air. We stopped once to refuel in Osaka, Japan. And from there we crossed the Sea of Japan to Korea.

When we were on the way back we stayed at Yokahama for about eight hours and they said anybody could get off who wanted to. I never did get off. I was afraid I would miss the boat! I wanted to come home. (Laughs)

We landed about a year after the truce. At first I was just south of the 38th parallel. The United States still had several divisions north of where we were. Then they started rotating them back to the States, and that’s when we moved back to Inchon, the main Army ordnance depot.

Inchon is where MacArthur first landed the troops. They pushed the Koreans all the way up to the Yalu River, the Chinese border. Then the Chinese came in and pushed MacArthur all the way back down to Inchon. Then we pushed them back up to the 38th. There’s a big sign on a bridge over the Han River south of Seoul, which says that the United Nations forces crossed this bridge three times—up and down and up again.

The fighting was over by the time I got there, but the destruction of the war was everywhere. Seoul was demolished. It was just a year after the fighting had stopped and there was no rebuilding that I could see. I remember going from where we were to eat hamburgers at the Seoul Military Post, the SMP, they called it. The sergeants were the only ones who could use the jeeps and the three-quarter ton trucks, and we would get them to take us, the privates and the pfcs, along with them. We didn’t have many interactions with the Koreans because most of them didn’t know any English. At the Depot there were two companies from the ROK. We called them “katusa,” Koreans attached to the United States Army. They ate at the same mess hall with us, but we couldn’t communicate with them. With the civilians working for us there was always one who knew English. I worked in a warehouse where we handled parts for jeeps and all the way to the five-ton trucks. And we would supply all of the companies close by.

When I first got there, there were guys who had served in the 2nd Division and the 1st Cavalry who had been in the fighting. If they had more than six months left to serve they were assigned to different companies to finish out their time. They told stories about a plane that would come over every night and drop a few bombs. They used to call him Bedtime Charley. The Korean War was strange because there really weren’t any frontlines. But it was quite an experience. I didn’t mind going because there wasn’t any fighting. My brother was there in 1951 and 1952. He was in the artillery, 3rd Division. They would use half-tracks to pull the 155mm’s because

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the jeeps could only pull the 105's. He was telling me about one time when they had to move out fast, to pull back, and they had to put a bomb in the engine to blow it up.

I got to see the hill they called Old Baldy. I don't know how many feet the artillery knocked off the top of that hill. Korea, especially in the northern part, is very much like here in northern New Mexico small valleys, then hills, and then more valleys. I remember during the early part of the Korean War, 1951 and '52, planes from Cannon Air Force Base in Clovis (New Mexico) used to do a lot of flight training around here, flying up and down the narrow canyons of the Rio Grande. But the weather in Korea is different. Around Inchon it rains a lot and it's always humid.

When I was there nearly everything was off limits. You could go from one company to another as long as you stayed on the road.

Homecoming

I thought we were going to make it for Thanksgiving in 1955, but we ended up in the Los Angeles bus depot. We got our separation papers the day before. There were about a hundred men from New York and New Jersey who chartered a plane to take them home. It was snowing that day and the plane crashed on take off. I don't know how many were killed. So we decided we would wait and take the bus home. I really didn't spend much time in the States while I was in the service. Some friends of mine ended up here in the States and they got to come home for Christmas. But I got back in one piece, and that's what counts.

Water

If we can hold on to the water, I'll guess we'll be okay. But there's so much demand for water in New Mexico and people have been looking at water in the small villages from the monetary standpoint and they say we don't generate enough money to account for our use of the water. It's going to be an uphill struggle to hold

our water from now on. And the water problem is one problem that is not going to go away.

Farming the Land

I hope that my son decides to take over this farm. If not, I don't know what will happen. What makes it kind of difficult for my place and also for yours (Harvey's?) is that people don't want big places anymore. They want just an acre or two so they don't have so much to take care of. As I've said before, most people want to work 8 hours a day and have their weekends off. But I don't know what I would be doing right now if I didn't get to go outside and work in the orchard whenever I feel like it. I find it very rewarding when you work all summer and then in the fall you go out and pick your fruit. And sell it. It means that you're not doing this just for yourself. You're feeding other people. Besides people in Santa Fe whom I deliver to, I get a lot of customers from Texas who come back every year. They may spend vacations in Tres Ritos or Taos Canyon, but before they go home they stop here, year after year, for some good old mountain-grown New Mexico apples.

Just yesterday as I was going to Española a guy in a big truck with a trailer honked at me as he turned the corner. He sometimes takes his trailer to Colorado to get potatoes and he was here just this fall to get his apples and I had to tell him I didn't have any to sell this year because the early frost killed our crop.

Working the Acequia

The other day I told JP (an acequia commissioner) up at the dam that I have been doing this kind of work for 55 years. We used to go in horse-drawn wagons with loads of rock and brush to try to build up the dam that diverts river water into the acequia. It would hold for awhile and then we got a heavy rain and the river would wash everything away. Then we would start all over again. I started serving on the Acequia Commission in 1962 or 63, because I was

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already on the Commission when I got married in 1964. I hope I'll never see again what happened in 1966. We had a heavy hailstorm that settled right over this valley. It wiped out everything. You walked up to where the ditch had been and you couldn't see it; it was completely filled in with silt.

When I first started working on the acequia in the early 50's, there were very few paid workers who would show up for the spring cleaning. Most of the workers were the parciantes or their children. When the mayordomo came around and told my mother she needed to put a worker on the ditch, she said it was either me or my brother. I never got paid for working on the acequia, even though this was the best-paying acequia in Dixon--\$5.80 a day! I was always working for the family. Now the mayordomo doesn't come around and ask the parciantes when there's work to be done. Under the present system, you pay your dues and the Commission and the mayordomo find the workers. For spring cleaning the pay last year was \$7 an hour, or \$56 a day. But with paid workers you have a problem when you have projects that need just a few hours of work, like building up the diversion dam in the Rio Embudo when water is low in the summer. Not too many young fellows like to go into the river and get wet for just a few hours pay.

We need outside paid workers because the parciantes are getting older and we can't do that kind of work anymore. And, as I said, most of the young people have moved away. The community is also changing. Last week I went to Dixon Elementary School with members of the American Legion post. We had a bunch of organization patches from Army divisions and the Air Corps to show the students and tell them about our military service. But it was hard to believe there were so few students in the school, only about 60. And I understand they lost a few more over the Christmas holidays. When I was growing up, Dixon had over 150 students. Now it's becoming a community for the retired---no kids, just a lot of old people. I see the bus taking the junior high and high school students to Española. There's just one bus for Dixon and Velarde, and it's not

full. Years ago there was one bus just for Dixon alone and it was full.

Keeping the Ditch Alive

The biggest problem we're facing is that it's getting more and more expensive to maintain the land. A lot of people really aren't generating any money from the land. They're not planting enough for themselves and so they find it hard to justify paying that much for the spring-cleaning, the mayordomo, and maintenance and repair. And some are not even using the water. For us it's different. We have orchards and we make back what we pay. I was telling Nina that every year I would hope to have at least enough to pay the ditch expenses, and the real estate taxes, and maybe the homeowner's insurance.

Marketing What You Grow

I really don't know if I'll go to Santa Fe Farmers' Market again. More and more people are showing up with their produce and their fruit and it's getting harder and harder to sell. I think if you go on a weekly basis, you develop customers. I wasn't going every week because I didn't have enough to sell. And sometimes when I did go, everybody seemed to have the same thing. Last year I started in the latter part of August with Golden Delicious apples, tomatoes, peaches, and pears, and everybody was selling the same thing!

Last year we were able to sell most of our apples at the State Fairground Market in Albuquerque. But it's a long, long drive, over a hundred miles one way. You get up early enough to leave here before 5, and even then by the time you get there all the good spots are taken by people who live there. At those flea markets people sell just about everything. I've never tried the one in Santa Fe. And I got a letter the other day from people in El Dorado who are trying to set up their own farmers' market. They sent me a questionnaire about what days I might go and what I might sell. It's a long drive, too, but it might be worth it.

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A lot of people now want fresh fruit and vegetables. They are tired of produce in the supermarkets that has been in storage for a long time and has traveled halfway across the country. People are anxious to buy local fresh fruits and vegetables, which you pick one day and sell the next. And when I sell right here at the corner of our road and the highway to Dixon, I tell people they can't get anything much fresher; I just picked it at the farm maybe just an hour ago. And this year I was even getting people from Dixon. I ran out of peaches right away. Even pears. I sold just about everything I could pick right there on Sunday mornings.

Because we lost so much fruit in that late spring frost, I didn't even have enough to take to Santa Fe to my regular customers at the State Land Office where I used to work. I even got calls from people asking when I was coming in. I said I didn't know if I would have anything for them. Matt, my son, did go to Albuquerque one Saturday with about 28 bushels and he was home early. He sold them all and people wanted to know when he was coming back. I can move probably up to six, or maybe seven hundred boxes at the most. That's mostly Red Delicious. When I have more than that, it's kind of hard to sell them all.

Future

I don't how long I'll keep doing farming. (Laughs) Not much longer. I'm already 69. I'm slowing down—I can see it. Every year it keeps getting harder to do the work. My son Matt likes to sell. He's ready to load the truck and go. But he does help me. Of course the job he has now is very demanding. There are times when he has to go in on weekends. Last Saturday he spent practically the whole day at the bank. With all the remodeling that's going on they had to move all the computers. He had to go in and make sure they were ready to go for Monday morning.

I used to work in the orchard after work and every weekend. I would take my vacation in September to do the harvest. And sometimes I would take annual leave on Friday. But using vacation

for working on the farm was okay with Nina. She never liked to travel.

I guess when we live in such a beautiful place we don't need to travel.

Right. I get customers from Amarillo who can't get over how beautiful it is here in the mountains. Their country is just flat.

Professional Work

I was an accountant with the New Mexico State Land Office. The official title was financial specialist, supervisor. I had mostly ladies working with me. In fact there was a time when I was the only man working in that department. On special occasions, mostly birthdays, a limo from the Sheraton would pick us up to go out for lunch. A friend of mine would see us out the window and say, "There goes Clovis and his harem." (Laughs) There were usually about 8 girls and me.

When I started working there in December 1960 the Land Office had just moved into its brand new building on Cerrillos Road. I used to tell people I came with the building. I worked there for thirty-one years. I enjoyed it. We handled the revenue generated by state lands. The Land Office is a trust for its beneficiaries. At least 70 percent of the revenue goes to the public schools. When New Mexico became a state, and even before that as a territory, certain sections were dedicated to education and other public purposes—the universities, public schools, even reservoirs. The royalties from leases of state land goes to the state permanent fund. The interest from the fund investments goes to the beneficiaries. I am kind of worried now that some people, according to what I read in the paper, are trying get hold of the permanent fund itself, not just the royalties. Right now I think there is 9 billion dollars in the fund. One of the administrators at New Mexico Military Institute once told me that the school got no appropriations from the General Fund but depended completely on interest from the permanent fund and tuition.

For the last couple of years we were working on a new program

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to keep better track of the oil and gas wells on state land. We combined functions from the Conservation Division, which set production levels and monitored how much was being produced, the Taxation and Revenue Department, which received royalty payments, and the Land Office, which issued the leases. The purpose was to give the Land Office enough information to make sure companies were actually paying what they owed. Later on the Land Office hired auditors who went over the payments on each lease. If they discovered underpayment ten years ago, they went to the company for back payment. The state has no statute of limitations. At the time we spent practically every day in meetings to gather information. So it was nice to come home in the evenings and grab a shovel and run the water or clean the ditch.

Combining Farming and City Work

Small farmers today have to take outside jobs because you can't generate enough money from the land to make a livelihood. The only thing you used to have to pay years ago was the electric bill. But now you have so many conveniences and you have to pay for them. So you end up doing farming after work. It's supposed to be part-time but it ends up being a little more than that.

Nicasio Romero, head of the New Mexico Acequia Association, said to me once that farm work was "therapeutic" for me. Yes! It was a way to relax. I used to tell Nina to look at her dad. He would do farming and he would weave and he lived to be 101. My mother passed away at 96. If you're healthy, work's not going to hurt you in any way. It helps you. I used to look forward to daylight saving time so I would have an hour or two extra to work outside when I came home.

Then you look at the results of your labor in the fall. The fruit, the vegetables. Whatever you grow. And people like what we grow and keep coming back. An old man from Tucumcari who used to come here with his daughter told me years ago that he could get the fruit cheaper in Hondo but he preferred ours. I don't know if it's the

water, or the climate, or the altitude—it must be a combination of all three that makes the apples tastier.

Do you think it might also be the people around here? (Clovis laughs.)

I used to tell people that I would go out and sing to the trees and whistle for them. I've heard that talking to the plants and keeping music playing improves the quality of fruit and vegetables. But we still don't get enough snow in the winter and it doesn't get cold enough to kill the bugs. I'll never forget the cold spell in 1971 when even some of the trees froze. That following summer I had some of the cleanest apples I've ever had. The freeze apparently got rid of most of the bugs. But then you get a new crop of bugs every year and it's getting more difficult to control them.

Maybe you would like to have some way to make your orchard colder in the winter to kill the bugs? (Laughs)

But I remember reading in the paper years ago that some scientist at Los Alamos was working on a process to get fruit trees to bloom later and miss the late spring frost kill. I never heard anything more about it. I remember we had an apricot tree near the neighbor's fence that for some reason bloomed almost two weeks after the other apricots. That's the one we got fruit from when the others froze out. In Velarde they had a process called rain for rent. They would pump water directly from the Rio Grande and spray it on apple trees during the daytime when it was warm. The water was cold enough to confuse the trees into thinking it was still winter and hold back their blooming to miss the frost.