

A short story of my life in the Hondo Valley

by Joe Torrez, Geologist & Valley resident

I was born in Hondo, NM to Amanda Montes Torrez and Ignacio Gutierrez Torrez in 1947. I was born in a residence, which happened to be a back room of a store belonging to Martin Torrez, Ignacio's father. The store's name was *La Isla. (The Island)* The Store was located south of the Rio Ruidoso where the road crosses to the south side of the Rio in Hondo. Later the store was moved to the north of Highway 70 across from the old Hondo School. My Grandfather and my aunts ran this store for many years. I along with many of my cousins grew up in the Hondo Valley. I began my education at the old School in Hondo, (the Luis Jimenez home and studio) in 1952. I attended the 1st grade two years in a row, the reason for that is that my mother, Amanda Montes Torrez, a schoolteacher educated at Hondo and the University of New Mexico, took me along instead of sending me to a sitter. I moved to the present location in 3rd grade went through elementary and high school at Hondo and finished my education at New Mexico Highlands University. Me and my brothers and sisters and cousins grew up in the valley in a poor but humble environment. Most of us learned to speak Spanish prior to going to school. Then we were chastised for speaking Spanish at school and were forced to learn English. Most of the residents survived on subsistence farming and ranching sometimes supplemented by work at the Fort Stanton Hospital where valley residents served as janitors, orderlies, nurses or what ever was needed at the Tuberculosis Sanatorium or by working at the Race Track at Ruidoso Downs. My two younger sisters also attended NM Highlands and are currently educators.

My Great-grandparents on both sides as well as my wife's great-grandparents were all early settlers of the Hondo Valley. My great-grandparents on my father's side were Ignacio Torrez married to Manuelita Lucero who later married to Roberto Brady of Billy the Kid fame after Ignacio's death. My grandparents on my father's side were Martin Torrez and Isabel Gutierrez, daughter of Damian Gutierrez and Juanita Sanchez. Damian Gutierrez was a coffin maker and his daughters, Isabel Torrez, Anita Martinez, Josefita Brady would sew the linings for the coffins. Martin Torrez, besides owning a store at Hondo and homesteading a ranch (Steven's ranch and home) was one of the 1st farmers to plant an apple orchard in the valley. He was also "El Caporal", or a foreman of shepherds for two ranchers named Mr. Stover and Mr. Clemens. He cowboied for many other ranchers, managed their sheep herds and helped in the harvest and transport of the wool. Martin also peddled fruit and vegetables all over the state. My Dad once told me he and his brother Eloy once herded a bunch of pigs from the Stover Ranch (now the Sam Donaldson ranch) to their Grandmother's place Juanita Gutierrez, in San Patricio. My grandfather on my Mother's side was Jesus Montes. He was married to Tomasita Aldaz from the Rancho Torrez, a small community on the Rio Bonito northwest of Lincoln. Her parents were Mariano Aldaz (Aladaz from Tierra Amarilla & San Marcial) and Francisca Torrez. Jesus' parents Alejo Montes from San Elizario, Texas was married to Angelita Sanchez from Mesilla, NM. Jesus, his brother Juan and brother in law Mauro Sanches were sheep and goat ranchers who homesteaded in Alamo Canyon. They also maintained homes and farms in the valley so that their children could attend school.

The memories I have of growing up are of my Grandfather Martin who usually had most of his grandchildren with him and kept them busy during the summers. He had a 1952 Dodge flatbed truck with sideboards where he transported all of us boy grandchildren, to either the Gallagher store or the Ambrocio Chavez Store for soda pop and candy and then put us to work helping him tend to his garden. He usually paid for the cheap labor with a watermelon or cantaloupe and entertained us by shooting ground squirrels out of the apricot trees and cooking them as a treat. He taught us how to shoot his 22 single shot rifle and how to skin and cook a squirrel. He also taught us to butcher a lamb and make "burruniates." "Burruniates" were the small intestine rolled around the large intestine and baked along with the sheep head. He would take the brain, tongue and cheek meat from the head and would fix us sandwiches with warm tortillas. It was all very tasty but we drew the line at eating eyeballs. I along with my cousins spent a lot of time with my Grandfathers. On Saturdays, before we were old enough to have a driver's license, he would send us to the old Fritz Spring Ranch in the old Dodge to bring a tank of water to fill the cistern. They had no running water and an outdoor privy as did most homes during that time. I also remember gathering palitos (little sticks of wood) and tending the fire while my Grandmother Isabel made homemade soap.

Our Grandfather Jesus or Tio (Uncle) Clovis would take us up to the ranch in Alamo Canyon to check the waters and fences. We would get to ride on ole Red, my Uncle's Eloy Montes' horse and El Moro, a gray gelding. My Uncle Eloy died in the invasion of Normandy and never got to see ole Red mature from a colt. Ole Red died at the ranch in his thirties and was used by all of the grandchildren. I remember on one trip My Tio Clovis and my cousin Bobby Richardson were riding on El Moro and my brothers Ray and Albert and I were riding ole Red along a fence when we encountered a rattlesnake. My Tio Clovis got off his horse and smashed the snake with a rock and the horses never spooked. We all used to ride bareback so that incident could have been disastrous. I remember going up to Alamo Canyon during the time the sheep were sheared, the lambs were castrated and marked and the whole extended family would participate. I especially remember the rams butting each other. Our typical lunch consisted of beans, potatoes and macaronis and tortillas. The elders usually had chile with their meals. The food

was packed in mason jars and carried in #10 lard cans. Those were the best meals. The three homesteaders, Jesus, Juan and Mauro, maintained three shacks near the old well. They used to keep their entire families in those three shacks all summer. My Mom tells me of how they were sent out into the nearby hills with the sheep and goats and had to spend the night out caring for them. In the winter they would move back to the valley so they could attend school.

In the valley, when the next generation got a little older, spent most of our free time playing along the river. We used to swim in our underwear wherever we could find a pool deep enough to swim in. The best pool was located at my Tio Eloy (my dad's older brother) and my Tia Savina's home. It was called the "hondavle" or deep pool and most of the kids from the valley would go swimming there. The pool was about 6 to 10 feet deep and had a steep cliff about 10 high for diving. On the opposite side was a sandy beach area. After swimming we could always beg a meal of beans and potatoes and warm tortillas from our Tia Savina. I remember fishing the river using a safety pin, string and a willow stick for a pole baited with an earth worm. We were quite successful but we only caught chubs, which weren't very good eating. When the apples came along we would sneak a saltshaker and anxiously await the San Juan apples to get big enough to eat. We also ate watercress with salt out of the river. Once in a while we would cook a neighbor's chicken. Most of the time it would end up raw but we never suffered from salmonella. During the rainy season we would await the floods and race the puntera (head of the flood) and try to cross the river ahead of it. We had many ways of entertaining ourselves. I'm glad we didn't try to cross ahead of the flood of 1965. That flood was so big it filled the valley from side to side, most of the bridges were washed away, many homes were ruined and much livestock was totally lost. Every fence in the valley had to be redone as well as every field had to be cleaned with the ditches and dams had to be redone. It took about 2 or 3 years to get things back to normal. When we were smaller we would play "carritos" or little cars. Since we were very poor we would make our cars out of a piece of 2X4 with a small piece nailed on to the bottom to serve as a cab. We would make corrals with little sticks and string and our livestock was made out of gourds with sticks for legs. The best places to play were on old abandoned asequia banks because of the silt and we usually had a nice shade from the English walnut trees. I remember I once made a dump truck out of an ice tray and a two by four. We would shape sticks into handguns and rifles and play cowboys and Indians all over the hillsides and would usually end up in the river.

I myself didn't get to go out and work on ranches and farms as my older brother did because my Dad had enough work for me on the farm. He taught us to dig ditches, pull weeds, prune trees and how to work on the farm. Every year we would have to work our share on the asequias. The Storm ditch was the one that fed my Grampo Martin's orchard and my Dad usually had a lease on land serviced by that asequia. The other asequia was the Pablo and Ambrocio Chavez asequia. My older brother and I would go as my Dad's other person and together we would be assigned so many tareas. (a measure according to the labor force needed or the difficulty of the work required- usually 12' in length) We would have to cut the side banks and clean the bottom out at least two shovels deep. Needless to say we would do our share and my Dad would come and help us out so we would fall to far back. The mayordomos (ditch boss) job was to assign the tareas and ensure the depth and width was to his satisfaction. These asequias trace their history back to the early 1860's. We also had to maintain the "atarques" (dams) as part of the annual cleaning of the asequias. Next came the pruning of the trees. My dad usually cut the larger branches and we would clean up all the water sprouts. We also had the unpleasant job of picking and stacking the cuttings so we could remove them from the orchard. Once we had the orchard pruned and cleaned up came the spraying. We sprayed the fruit in those days with all kinds of lethal stuff that has been outlawed. Then came the harvest. My Dad would load semi-trailers mostly with red delicious, goldens, stamen, winesap and jonathan apples. Those trucks came mostly from central Texas. The culls and windfalls were sold mostly at the Mercado in El Paso. We would load the pickup with apples and leave early in the morning and arrive at the Mercado on Paisano in El Paso at about 6 AM. Prices would range from \$4 to \$5 a bushel to \$1.50 for culls or windfalls. We had fruit all late summer on. It began with the cherries then the peaches then the plums, then the pears, then the apples. In the meantime, we had to weed the garden and collect the squash, green beans, corn and the rest of the vegetables. When we had more than we could eat we would feed the excess to the pigs. We used to raise alfalfa in between the rows of apple trees while they were small and stack and save it for the milk cows and calves. In the fall we would have "mantanzas" and butcher the hogs we had raised. The hog was butchered, shaved and chicharones were cut from the fat. All who came to help shared the meat and it was usually a party with the ladies cooking chile colorado, frijoles and carnitas to go along with the chicharones that were used in the rendering of the lard. The kids would get to eat the ears and the tail of the pigs that were roasted directly in the coals. They were kind of yucky but we thought they were good.

Every morning before school, I would have to milk the cow and send her and her 4 calves out to pasture, feed the chickens and let them out. At night we would have to pen up the calves and chickens, feed them all and gather the eggs. I hated to go to school with milk splashed on my shoes. During the apple harvest season I would

ride my \$4.00 bike down Highway 70 and open my Dad's fruit stand. My biggest excitement was selling apples during hunting season. I remember hunters stopping for fruit on their way back to Roswell or Texas. I think it was just a way for them to show of their hunting success. Hunting deer was really big once we got up to the age of about 12 or 13. You would get to go to the large hunting camps with our Dads or Uncles. Most of the hunting occurred at either Fort Stanton or the in the Capitan Mountains. Today the best hunting seems to be in the Valley. During those days you could just about hunt anywhere. Landowners didn't seem to mind but then it was mostly walking and not destroying the land with ATV and 4X4 trucks. Elk hunting in those days was unheard of. The elk herds did not exist in the area until the late 70's.

For entertainment on holidays we would go to the Apache summit for a picnic and later to Mescalero to celebrate the Forth of July. We usually celebrated Easter in our orchard with an Easter egg hunt and picnic and a mantanza of a borrego (lamb) which was cooked underground. It was always a favorite food along with all the trimmings. Family reunions occurred at either my Grandfather's orchard or my other Grandfather's ranch and usually involved a picnic and the grownup men did a lot of wrestling. Family reunions were celebrated at the Baca Campground in the Capitan Mountains. Today, Baca Campground is the only place big enough to handle large family reunions.

Every fall after the majority of the apple crop was gone we would attend the Eastern NM State Fair and Parade in Roswell and use the trip to Roswell for a hamburger at Katy's Café or a burrito at the Arias Café in Roswell. The trips to Roswell when we were younger were usually in the back of my Dad's pickup. He would put a tarp over the cattle racks for shade and we would picnic on the way to town.

August was celebrated by attending the "Centenio" at Lincoln now call "Old Lincoln Days." The Hispanic community would make it a big weekend. Many food booths were set up, the pageant would be going on and the young folks would be walking the length of the town visiting. A dance at the Maez Sala (Hall) with a band from either Alamogordo or Roswell brought just about every kid out to the dance, from the parents to the very young. The Rhythm Kings or the Starliners were popular dance bands. Dancing was mostly "Tacuaches" or corridos, mambos, some polkas, jitterbugs, slow dances or 50's music and country western. It was a weekend where you would get to meet girls or boys from other communities. The teens and young adults would also attend dances at the Nike in Carrizozo, the Armory and Dunagan's hall in Alamogordo or the very brave would go to Roswell to the Cielito Lindo.

We were all raised close to the Catholic Church and its functions; every religious occasion seemed to involve a procession. At night before going to bed we would usually gather around the Abuelas and pray the rosary, always in Spanish. For funerals it was traditional and today it is still customary to bury your departed by hand. A velorio (rosary) was conducted at the home and a mass at the church the next day. There was an elder that would measure the gravesite and tell you how deep to dig. The old San Patricio cemetery was very rocky and crowded and sometimes you would encounter old boards while digging a grave. The Hondo cemetery was also very rocky especially at the north side. The land for the Hondo cemetery was donated by my Grandmo Isabel's brother's family and is still considered a family cemetery thanks to the Gutierrez family.

The Hondo Public School activities were also a very large part of our young lives. From the Christmas pageant to the Hondo Fiestas, They were a large part of our growing up. Mr. Fermin Montes and his wife Cirenia started the fiestas as a way to keep in touch of our Hispanic culture in the mid 40's. The tradition continues today and the annual fiesta is put on for two days every May. Mr. Montes wrote and published a book, "*Dreams can become a Reality*" after his retirement as Superintendent of the Hondo Public Schools. It is an excellent reference of the valley and it's public schools. Dancing is one of the activities that continue on with students that attended the Hondo Schools. A Hondo Fiesta dancer can usually recognize another by the way they dance. Hondo Students have been able to travel all over the country and Mexico as a result of participating in the Fiestas. Most of the students at Hondo go on to college and have been quite successful. The majority of the faculty is former students or teachers with some kind of tie back to the community. They come back to the valley because of the quality of life. Kids from the valley have been quite successful. We have attorneys, aero-space engineers, geologists, educators, Medical Drs, nurses, pharmacists, artists, restrauant owners, computer software companies, helicopter pilots, professional cowboys, military veterans, carpenters, cabinet builders and residents with many skills and talents that claim the Hondo Valley as their home. The Valley has served the country well both in peacetime and at war.

You find the best climate in the valley. It's not too hot and not too cold. We don't have many bugs and the humidity is just about right. We get snowstorms but can usually drive the same afternoon. Every body is usually greeted with either a handshake or a hug. Newcomers are readily accepted into the community. Orchards and fruit stands from the past have given way to artists, horse farms and livestock raising. Most gardens anymore are usually for home use. We still hunt and put away fruit and vegetables. Sundays are usually a family day and many families

get together after Church services for a breakfast of farm eggs, bacon, sausage, fried potatoes and gravy and of course, red and green chile. The local gathering places are the Hondo School, St Jude's Catholic Church or Walmart at Ruidoso Downs.