



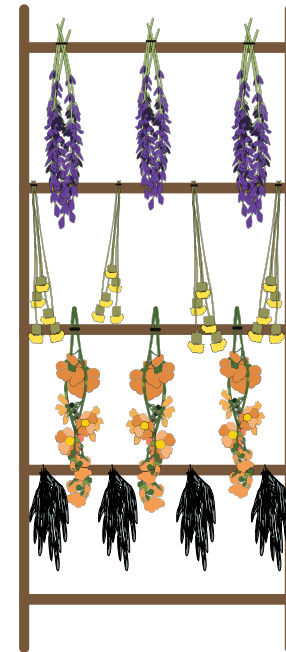
cuadernos

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LA CURANDERA

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Manitos Community Memory Project



Healers are important in any society, and the *curanderas* have always served a critical role in the well being of the manito landscape. *Curanderismo* is an approach to healing that combines traditional Indigenous and European practices based on a spirituality and knowledge acquired over millennia. *Curanderismo* centers human health by connecting the curative properties of local plants, herbs and natural remedies to their effect upon the body, mind and spirit at the center of this practice. *Curanderas* encompass multiple disciplines and healing arts, including *yerberas* (herbalists), *medicas* (medical practitioners), *sobadoras* (massage therapists) and *parteras* (midwives), as well as many other practices that included bone setting and accupressure.

This cuaderno features this important persona and the content includes the names of twenty *curanderas* whose skill contributed to the healing of their communities. Following this list is also an excerpt from a story collected in 1940 in Placitas, NM, as part of the Federal Writers' Project.

Maria Eduvigen Abeyta Montoya (1864-1937) Mogote, CO. *Curandera*, *yerbera* and *partera*. Born in Abiquiú, New Mexico, she is remembered as both a midwife and herbalist, and an avid smoker. Her skill was felt by many in Conejos County, and she passed her knowledge down to her daughter-in-law, Cleofas Gomez Montoya.

Isabel Apodaca Córdova (1901-1987) Arroyo Hondo/San Cristobal, NM. *Curandera*, *yerbera*, *partera* and *sobadora*. Known as 'la cieguita,' the woman could not see with her eyes, but experienced the world and healed those around her with her hands.

Jesusita Aragon (1908-2005) Las Vegas, NM. *Curandera*, *yerbera* and *partera*. Her grandmother, Dolores "Lola" Gallegos, was her mentor. Jesusita was only 13-years old when she delivered her first baby and over the course of her professional life delivered almost 46,000 babies.

Amalia Duran (1912-2016) Arroyo Seco, NM. *Curandera*, *yerbera*, *partera*, and *sobadora*. She studied her healing practice from Sofia Ortega and learned the art of the healing herbs of the Upper Rio Grande Valley. She helped to deliver many local babies, including her grandson. Many recall her strong healing hands. On top of her kitchen table is where many received one of her well-known massages.

Sabinita Herrera (1933-) Truchas, NM. *Curandera* and *yerbera*. Her father imparted the importance of herbs as they gathered them at the base of Truchas Peaks. When the Truchas Clinic opened, she was recruited to become the clinic's herbalist. She has continued to practice to this day.

Gregorita Rodriguez (1901-1989) Santa Fe, NM. *Curandera, yerbera, sobadora and partera*. She learned her *curanderismo* from her tía Valentina, who had apprenticed with Gregorita's grandmother, Juliana Montoya. Gregorita was quoted several times saying, "curanderas cure with their minds, their experience and their herbs."

Genera Quintana Abeyta (1875-) Mora, NM and Abeyta, CO. *Curandera, yerbera and partera*. Her healing practice was learned from a variety of people, including Carmelitas in the convent, her mother-in-law, Apolonia, and Navajos in the family.

Delfinita Romero Trujillo (1886-1956) Del Norte, CO. *Curandera, yerbera, sobadora and partera*. According to her granddaughter, Esther Leon, she "used herbs to cure headaches, stomach ache, arthritis, memory, weight loss, colds and flu."

Gabrielita Mares de Pino (1905-2000) Cañoncito, NM. *Curandera, yerbera and sobadora*. Trained as a healer by her grandmother, Jacinta Ortega de Mares, and apprenticed with her father-in-law, Angel Pino, in the practice of massage. She was known to give herbs to her patients because, she said, "they are a gift from God for the healing and comfort of those who have faith in them."

Juanita Montoya de Martinez (1842-1890) Taos, NM. *Curandera, yerbera and partera*. According to her grandson, Lorin W. Brown, she was summoned to treat every type of ailment and "at one time or another she had been in every home in Taos County."



Sofia Ortega (1886-1970) Valdez, NM. *Curandera, yerbera, and partera*. Sofia was born in La Lama. Sofia was known to walk barefoot, so that her feet were always touching the ground, particularly when practicing medicine. There is a story that when her husband died, she raised him from the dead. It was a cold winter and she didn't have any firewood in the house. So, she sent him to chop wood and then let him lay back to rest. She is commonly referenced as "La Grande".


Juanita Sedillo (1895-) Albuquerque, NM. *Curandera, yerbera and partera*. She learned from her grandmother who was also a curandera. In an interview held in 1980, she said, "There's always new curanderas who teach the next generation, and that's how the art continues, see."



Other curanderas whose biography has not been collected include the the following:

Luisita Durán, Arroyo Seco, NM
Ursulita Florez, Arroyo Seco, NM
Josefita Mandonado, Arroyo Seco, NM
Cervellona Martínez, Desmontes, NM
Maximiliana Martínez, Questa, NM
Tane Martínez, La Lama, NM
Margarita Mascareñas, Cañón, NM
Florencio "Doctor Lencho" Martínez, Peñasco, NM

In 1940, Lou Sage Batchen collected a story in Placitas, N.M., entitled “La Curandera” parts of which are excerpted and edited in what follows.



In the village of Las Placitas, there is a little house nestled close to Cerro Negro and the hill of black rock carved with Indian symbols. This house became a kind of sanctuary for weary souls and a little temple of health for the sick. It was *La Casa de La Curandera, Jesusita*.

She kept her house fresh and clean, from the *vigas* which supported the ceiling of *latas* and the adobe mud roof, down to the hard earthen floor. Her walls were snow-white with *yeso*, and the hand-hewn timbers of her windows and dwarf door were scrubbed to a saffron tint.

Jesusita was a very small person, with slender, graceful hands with which she did half of her talking and much of her healing. She wore many petticoats, made of cloth she wove herself, and she kept them fresh and clean. To one of them she fastened a little sack filled with the hair of every different form of life she could find. This would save her from the power of the witches, as would the piece of *cachana* she wore about her person. This charm against witches was worn for many years and finally given to a grandchild to preserve her from the power of the witches. Jesusita feared the witches even more than she feared the devil; but then she was born in 1830.

There was always a pleasant suggestion of a flower garden in the air in her house. Those *vigas* were festooned with drying herbs, which restored health, eased pain and saved life. When they were dried, they would be taken down and carefully put away for use. There was *yerba buena* (mint), *guaco* (birthwort), *berraza* (water-parsnip); all superior remedies for *dolor de stomacho* (hurt of stomach), as all stomach ailments were called in those days. But not all the *yerbas* good for this ailment were dried.

There was *chan* which was eaten when green, a pinch of salt added. There was *ramo de sabine* (twig of savin). Boil the leaves and make strong tea. Both these remedies were sure cures for cramps of the stomach. *Yerba de zorra* (fox-weed) also made a desirable tea for stomach disturbances.

From the *vigas* hung much *poleo* (pennyroyal). It was the magic fever reducer. Put an egg white, well beaten, added to the dry *poleo* and well mixed, a little salt sprinkled over it. This made it effective, [especially] when spread as a poultice on a piece of cloth and covered with an equal sized piece of pin pricked paper. This poultice was bound to the forehead and soles of feet, -paper side down-, and it brought quick relief to victims of high fevers. So good a remedy was it, that it is used to this day. A strong tea made from the reddish flower of the dried saffron (*yerba de azefrán*) was also an aid in reducing fever. It required some sort of sweetening for best results. Raisins made from the grape at home were used before the advent of “yellow sugar.” *Azefrán* relieved colic.

Jesusita’s house was sweetly scented by the drying *cilantro* (coriander). *La Curandera* dried *mansanilla* (chamomile) in abundance. That *yerba* was the baby medicine. It made excellent tea for the cure of colic, and it was considered a food substitute. *Cota* (proper name should be *macha* and it is lamb’s lettuce) when dried made a very popular drink good for almost any disposition toward general debility. It is popular to this day. Also, *cota* was dried in abundance in the old days and stored for using to light a fire when flint rocks furnished the sparks. Suspended from Jesusita’s *vigas* was a plentiful supply of that *yerba*.

But not all of Jesusita’s cure alls were hung from the *vigas* to dry. Packed away in all those *tinajas* inside and upon the *tapanco* (cupboard) were quantities of all the important roots and wonder-cures of her time. Prominent among the roots was *yerba del manza*, which was indeed a lifesaver, a killer of infections. The root was thoroughly boiled, and bath water was made strong with it. The infected parts of the body were

soaked in this water. Not once, but many times. No infection survived those repeated, sustained baths. To this day it is declared that the doctors of medicine who came to the Territory of New Mexico in the early days had no germ destroyer to compare with *yerba del manza*. Much of *yerba del lobo* (herb of the wolf) was stored in the *tinajas*. This root made a tea which was given to ease the first pains of childbirth.

Another *tinaja* contained *tronkos del calabazas* (stems of the pumpkins). When she was summoned to relieve *dolor del garganta* (hurt of the throat), regardless of the specific hurt, the sufferer's throat, both inside and out, was plastered with a paste made by mixing toasted and powdered *tronkos del calabaza* with fat and *sal de Zuni*. This *sal de Zuni* was the outstanding eye wash of La Curandera's early days, when dissolved in water.

In those old days *rheuma* was a common complaint. The local *remedio* was Alonzo García (a short, sturdy plant with purple blossoms). It was well boiled and the water from it used as a bath. But there was another remedy for *rheuma* (rheumatism).

It cost more *chili*, *frijoles*, wheat or more of whatever was given to pay for it. But the compensation for the service or *remedios de la curandera* or *el curandero* were called gifts, because they were free-will offerings; but there was a definite understanding among the people concerning the rarer cures. *Hedionda* (fetid) was the favored cure for *rheuma*. La Curandera traveled far to gather it. It was a vile smelling herb but a sure remedy. It was boiled and boiled, and the strong water was used as a bath.

La Curandera traveled mile upon mile to fetch the one true *remedio* for *dolor del corazón* (hurt of the heart). It was *almagra* (Indian red) from near a place they called *Azabache* (jet) on *Mesa de Chaco*, which was near to two-hundred miles from the house. In those old days *los curanderos y las curanderas* made pilgrimages in the direction of the setting sun into the land

that is now the state of Arizona. There they found *hedionda*, *almagra*, *sal de Zuni* and *azabache*, from which charms were cut. These black charms protected their wearers from witches. It was the custom for *curanderos* and *curanderas* to keep a supply of charms on hand for their customers.

Jesusita powdered the *almagra* and wet it with sufficient water to knead it, then she worked it into small loaves and put them away for use. When required for her patients, she broke a small piece from a loaf and mixed it with water until it was the color of the heart, then it was taken for *dolor del corazón*. Needless to say, it was an effective cure; for she used her mind and her hands as well as her *remedios*. Her words, “*No tener miedo*” (have no fear) were powerfully reassuring and cures in themselves: a philosophy of the old Southwest borrowed from the old East, or was it the other way?

Jesusita had another supply of roots in her *tinajas*, a goodly quantity. It was called *inmortal* (endless) for the commonest of all the ailments she was called upon to heal, colds. This root induced sneezing, an almost endless number of sneezes. But that was the cure. The more the patient sneezed, the sooner would he be cured of the cold.

If the cold got beyond bounds and ended in *dolor de pecho* (hurt of chest), a more severe treatment was given. A poultice of *cebollas y sebo de oso*. (Grease of the bear thoroughly mixed with shredded onions was how the poultice was prepared, and then it was put into a small cloth sack and laid on the chest.) This was the treatment for pneumonia, as they came to call the most acute pain of the chest in later days.

Friegue (rub) was the name she called her treatment for colds she gave the small children who rebelled against her *yerbas*. The patient was told to stand rigid and cross his arms upon his breast. Then he was thoroughly rubbed on his arms, shoulders, and neck. That completed, she placed her cupped hands under his elbows and raised him from the floor and shook him vigorously. This was repeated twice then followed a short rest, and the treatment resumed until she considered

her small patient had enough of it.

For the older ones who preferred to have their colds cured by means other than taking yerbas, there was “*remojos de pies*” (steeping the feet). Into a bath of steaming hot water she forced the cold-victim’s nether limbs. She squatted down beside the *tinaja* or copper kettle, whichever was used, and cascaded hands full of the water down her patient’s legs. When he was well heated from the rising steam, she wrapped him in a hot blanket and had him lie on a pallet. Soon he was in a sweat. If he obeyed her and remained in the blanket until she released him, his cold left him. If he obeyed his own impulse and kicked off the heavy home-woven cover, he was worse off than he was when she started the treatment.

In the old days the prime remedy for building blood was *sangre del berendo* (blood of the deer). When a deer was slaughtered, the blood was caught in *tinajas* and set aside to dry. When it was hard, it was sealed into the *tinaja* with *jara y peño de teá* (willow and pitch from the pine) and buried to keep it fresh for use. When needed, a *tinaja* was removed from its grave, opened, and the needed piece broken off. This piece was dissolved in water and then water added until the fluid was the color and consistency of human blood. The patient drank it. Both the taste and odor of this cure was almost beyond the patient’s ability to endure, but he downed it for his blood’s sake.

The pine tree offered aid in the cure of infections from bad burns, a remedy which never failed. So it happened that La Curandera was not baffled by a serious infection resulting from a burn. She merely walked to a pine tree where she was certain to find *gusano excremento* (excretion of worms which delved into the pine) and scraped out what she desired. This was mixed with candle tallow and sprinkled lightly with salt, spread on a cloth and bound to the infections. To prevent infections in deep cuts and hasten the healing, *gusano excremento* was mixed with bear grease instead of the tallow. Jesusita knew exactly what to do for asthma. Select a tender

branch from *el alamo* (the cottonwood), peel off the bark and boil it in water until but one quarter of the water remained. This made an excellent tonic which was administered regularly.

For the cure of hemorrhoids, there was a *yerba* which gave relief to those hardened enough to take the treatment. The dried *añil del muerto* (yerba of death), a poisonous herb which was a source of indigo, and was obtained in Mexico. When dried it was reduced to a powder, and for use it was mixed with hot grease and applied hot to the afflictions by rubbing, then covered with a hot cloth so hot it was just short of smoldering.

All around *La Cerro Negro*, La Curandera found *la calavacia* (the evil smelling wild gourd), which she boiled and boiled into a mash and bound by strips of cloth to swollen joints to reduce them. Such an effective cure it was that many use it to this day.

Jesusita was never selfish in the matter of her time when laboring over a victim of *viruelas* (smallpox), the scourge that wrought such havoc among the Indians. It was a dreaded disease but its marks were feared more than the plague itself. There was no one in those old days who worked harder to prevent her smallpox patients from carrying the scars of the disease all their days. She made a small mop of a rag well covered with the carbon from the fireplace and soaked in bear grease. This rag was folded into a cloth on which she had rolled tortillas many times and which was saturated with grease and sprinkled with *sal de Zuni*. She placed a heated stone on the floor near her patient’s bed and knelt by it. Then she started a treatment which was to continue without ceasing until its purpose was accomplished; and that was the total absorption of all pus so that no pockmark be left in the wake of the disease. Hour after hour through day and night she heated her hand mop on the stone and pressed the pustules on her patient’s body until they were clean and dry. When she fell exhausted upon the floor, some member of the patient’s family or some friend carried on. Thus went the treatment

until all danger of permanent markings upon the sick one was past. Wood ashes was the final touch to the treatment. The one *yerba* given in cases of smallpox was *verranza*, a cure for constipation. Where the patient could not swallow, the dried herb was rolled into pellets and with the aid of grease and fingers, was injected into the intestinal terminal.

Jesusita had her treatment for tired, weary “bones” and aching muscles. *Machucones*, she called it, and which was literally interpreted into “making old men into young men.” The candidate for youth (and strange to say it was always an old man) bared his body and lay prone upon the floor. Jesusita knelt beside him and with her clenched fist, her thumb projected upward, pounded the muscles up and down his body until all the soreness, stiffness, and aches were banished, and the body lay relaxed. And in rhythm to her padded beat upon the body, she mumbled or chanted, “*En el nombre de Diós te voy a curar.*” (In the name of God I cure you.) After hours of this dual treatment, the old man who painfully stretched himself upon her floor fairly sprang up from it. In this manner La Curandera kept her own husband young in body. The women in those long ago days had no time for keeping youthful.

In her flourishing days, Jesusita healed paralytics. From *anís Mexicano* (anise seed) she made a powder which she used as if it were soap. She moistened it and massaged the lather into the pores of the body of the patient, not once but many times. Tea made from the water in which the anís seed was boiled was given the victim of paralysis to drink. This cure required both time and patience, but it did restore the helpless to active life. This and her low voiced chant, “*En el nombre de Diós te voy a curar.*”

Dolor del espalda (hurt of the back) came in for its share of attention in the old days. For all of them, lime water was the cure. Always, there has been a kiln where local limestone was burned into lime. There was great need of it, not only for *el remedio* but for putting into the water in which the white corn

was soaked to remove the *cascara* (the viscid covering of the grains). The pozole made from this corn was one of the health foods of the long ago days, and still is.

Cara de vinagre (vinegar compact) was an item of importance on Jesusita’s list of cures, and it is a leading household remedy to this day. No headache went without a vinegar compact. No bruise or minor cut could possibly heal without one. Stiff necks, sore hands, sore feet, toothache, and nausea came in for their share of vinegar cures. Sprains were bathed in vinegar and bandaged. In later times when whiskey was available, it supplanted vinegar in the treatment of cuts, sprains and nausea. It was used also to kill infections.





The *Manitos Cuaderno Series* began in the summer of 2020 to tell stories about sickness and wellness from the Spanish Flu of 1918 to the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. The word *cuaderno* comes from the Latin *quaternus* and means a set of folded sheets of paper that form a book, a notebook. Historically, leatherbound *cuadernos* have been used to record celestial movements of the sun, moon and the stars as well as the accountings upon the ground, the movement of livestock, of waters and of the harvest. Clerics and *Hermanos* scripted upon the pages of these notebooks the prayers, dreams and mysteries, both joyful and sorrowful. Mothers, fathers, sons and, daughters recorded marriages, births and, in between the lines of these books, captured those poignant moments when people closed their eyes forever. The recollections made with ink and paper are as old as time and span across global geographies; they are the stories of community. As they have done globally, these *cuadernos* have recorded the experiences and histories of Manitos living in villages throughout northern New Mexico and southern Colorado and places to where they migrated. Collectively, these recordings represent a part of an archive, a community's repository that reflects upon the past, but as a living community, its present and future as well.

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