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Continuing Identity: Laguna Pueblo Railroaders in Richmond, California

KURT M. PETERS

A convenient route to California, water for steam locomotives, and resources for construction to the Pacific dictated late nineteenth-century United States railroad expansion west through New Mexico territory.¹ Land tenure conflicts in New Mexico plagued the Native American people of Laguna Pueblo, and by the 1880s their economy was shifting away from its traditional agrarian base. There is substantial evidence that declining agricultural success forced the people to look outside their traditional structure for subsistence. The arrival of railroading provided a needed outlet for internal economic pressures on the tribe.² The appearance of the steam locomotive in the Southwest offered alternative employment; railroads led directly to the departure of many Laguna people to distant regions as wage laborers.

After years of warring with tribes that plundered their villages, resisting Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo-American invaders, and accommodating squatters of all types, the Laguna Pueblo people came under a new pressure: Railroads would now vie for use of their land. In 1866 the Atlantic & Pacific received a federal grant of more than 13 million acres for a rail line between Albuquerque and the Arizona-California border at the Colorado River.³ Laguna territory lay squarely in

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the path of railroad surveys favoring a route from Colorado through New Mexico to California along the 35th Parallel.⁴

The Atlantic & Pacific entered New Mexico in 1880 and began laying track south of Albuquerque and west of Isleta Pueblo, toward Laguna. The Lagunas took the arrival of the railroad's construction crew as an opportunity to set a precedent: According to modern narratives, Jimmy Hiuwec, secretary of the tribal council, halted the crews preparing to lay track across Laguna land. In stopping this extension of the rail line, Hiuwec set in motion a visit from eastern railroad authorities, resulting in another accommodation of outsiders. The Lagunas and the railroad negotiated a peculiar innovation. They agreed the railroad could pass through the Laguna territory unmolested, with one stipulation: The railroad would forever employ as many of the Lagunas to help build and maintain the system as wished to work, so long as the governor of their pueblo granted the workers his approval.

This oral agreement in 1880 guaranteed the Laguna people jobs and the railroad an assurance of unhindered right-of-way. A handshake sealed the bargain, referred to in the narratives as "The Gentlemen's Agreement of Friendship."⁵ Every year thereafter, the Lagunas and the late-nineteenth-century purchaser of the Atlantic & Pacific lines, the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe, met to reaffirm the contractual terms. Laguna people call this annual contract renewal "watering the flower."⁶ There is a lack of documentation to corroborate these remembrances regarding whether a written contract between the railroad and the Lagunas exists. While no document is extant, descendants of the Lagunas involved believe that a valid oral contract continues in force.⁷

Laguna men began work building track. Some eventually became section maintainers on the portion of the rail line passing through the 125,225-acre Laguna lands.⁸ Others accepted Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe work at Albuquerque, Gallup, and other locations along the rail line outside the area. Throughout the era from 1880 and into the first quarter of the next century, the Lagunas provided loyal adherence to their agreement with the railroad. Just following the end of World War I this loyalty would undergo a trial, however.

Emergency wage increases granted during World War I contributed to railroad and government animosity toward labor unions. This antagonism erupted during a series of railroad strikes as management tried to roll back those gains. One

such confrontation, the Shopmen's Strike of 1922, strangled the operations of the railroads nationally. Service disruptions were commonplace. In one instance, striking Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe workers loyal to the unions put more than three hundred passengers off the train, leaving them in the summer heat at Needles, California. A request from company management for assistance tested the strength of the Laguna Pueblo agreement. The Laguna governor responded. He asked the Acoma Pueblo to send men to Richmond in order to buttress the insufficient supply of Laguna replacements, and so Acoma Pueblo also became involved.⁹ More than one hundred men moved from the pueblo in New Mexico to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Terminal at Richmond, California, to replace striking workers. Coach cars transported the Lagunas from their home through the picket lines. Once in the rail yards at Richmond, they bunked and ate for the duration of the strike in the Assembly Hall, one of the several maintenance buildings at the Terminal.¹⁰

As the strike continued, some railroads signed a compact known as the Baltimore Agreement, which essentially put control of the terms of rehiring strikers in management hands. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe continued to hold out and did not initially sign on to the negotiations. Instead management injected the diminished labor force with nonunion workers, including the Lagunas. The role these Native Americans played during the 1922 strike was the dangerous one of scab.

The Shopmen's Strike was settled in September of 1923.¹¹ According to Laguna narratives, some of the men remained at the Richmond Terminal, or at least remained with track crews using the facility as their base. Many Lagunas transferred to Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe centers at Barstow, Winslow, Calwa, and Needles, while others returned home.¹² Settlement of the strike was an ignominious defeat for the unions and initiated a sharp decline in membership.¹³ Lagunas were well aware of the significance of their role in the Shopmen's Strike; they saw participation as the proper action under their agreement with the railroad and as the proper Laguna response to direction from their governor in New Mexico.

As a result of general unionization, the railroad brotherhoods drew the Native American workers into their ranks during the 1940s. Laguna recollections are not clear as to exactly when they voted to organize the Richmond Shops.¹⁴ The post-

unionization attitude of the Laguna laborers remained loyal to the spirit of the agreement made in 1880; they made annual visits to the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe regional office in Los Angeles to “water the flower.”¹⁵ Laguna workers, however, also honored the principles of their union membership. One Laguna said later that “After the union come in, you join us or you’re out.”¹⁶

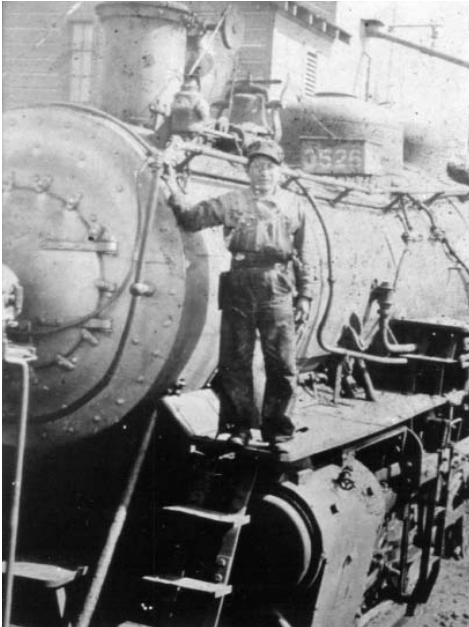
Before 1940 the Richmond area, described by historian James Gregory as a “dull industrial suburb,” encompassed a population of about 24,000 residents.¹⁷ During the late 1930s, a second group of Native Americans came from New Mexico to live in the terminal yards, but the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe and the city of Richmond were about to feel the pressures of World War II. The opening of the Kaiser Shipyards in addition to the existing railroad shops, the Standard Oil Refinery, and the Ford Assembly Plant made Richmond the “quintessential war boom town.” Its population exceeded 100,000 in three years of rapid growth.¹⁸

By World War II there were several settlements along the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe lines between Albuquerque and Richmond, in addition to the six Laguna villages on the reservation. Major villages of workers developed at Gallup, Winslow, Barstow, Richmond, and Los Angeles. The communities at Gallup, Winslow, Barstow, and Richmond applied to the Laguna governor at home for formal recognition as “Colonies of the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico,” and received this status. With this recognition came a more formalized community structure. The village at Richmond was thereafter headed by an annually elected governor. Village men were required to attend meetings during which only their native language was spoken, to vote on matters involving the home pueblo. Decisions were then transmitted to New Mexico by official correspondence from the village administration. Representatives from the village government often traveled home by train to attend important functions. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroad eventually adopted the same “Colony” designation for the village at Richmond.¹⁹

During the early war years at Richmond the men bunked in the railroad’s firehouse. When wives and families from New Mexico began arriving, the company provided more permanent rows of boxcar housing set on sidings. The company joined the boxcar homes in sets of two, and two families were assigned to each unit. Finally, the company installed a shower

and commode in each “duplex,” one set per family. Former residents remember the boxcar living quarters as “cozy.”²⁰ The clustering of boxcar homes grew out of the wartime need to accommodate the men’s spouses and families indefinitely. As Laguna men joined the military ranks away from the Richmond yards, the women filled their jobs.

The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe employed 2,000 women in 1925, and 3,500 by World War II, an increase that included many Lagunas.²¹ Sharply growing demands on labor pools during wartime found women filling such diverse railroading jobs as signal tower operators, agents, freight handlers, turntable operators, yard clerks, track sweepers, drill press operators, sheet metal workers, engine wipers, fire builders, and timekeepers.²² Among the Laguna families retired from the Richmond yards are many women who began their first off-reservation employment during World War II.²³ One woman from the village recalls “doing everything” on the job formerly done by the men, including changing the wheels on the locomotives. When asked about the rate of pay, she laughed and replied, “We wouldn’t *let* them pay us less than the men.”²⁴



SANTIAGO “SANDY” SARRACINO
(LAGUNA), AT WORK IN THE
ATCHISON, TOPEKA AND SANTA FE
RAILROAD YARDS, RICHMOND,
CA., CIRCA 1940.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE
SARRACINO FAMILY

The village developed a reputation as a focal point for entertaining returning Native American military men passing through the San Francisco Bay area. Sometimes the Natives brought along their friends—"you know, white boys" recalled a former worker—to enjoy "Indian food" prepared by the village Ladies' Club.²⁵ An active leader at the village remembered taking his accordion to entertain at the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe auditorium every Saturday during the war. He recalled other Native Americans there as having saxophone, guitar, drums and banjo, and playing "pretty good" in his "orchestra" at the village. As the servicemen left military service, "they stop over there and I put up a dance for them ... all different tribes," he said. Asked if the band ever went on tour, he replied that it was "just for the village" and played so that a "nice time" greeted the returning military men. He did acknowledge appearing personally in local talent shows and playing for senior citizens' groups. This retiree exclaimed, "Those old folks, they sure like it," and added that the melodies were "old Spanish music" he had learned without any formal musical training.²⁶

Another Laguna family spoke of participating in community activities when they arrived during the early 1940s. One person reported that "everyone" went to the Four Winds Club, a Native family social organization in Oakland. Several non-Native Americans, including a "former Mayor of Oakland and his wife," participated in the club activities.²⁷ Although the club's activities never brought it to Richmond, "folks from the village" enjoyed Thanksgiving dinners and Christmas parties at the Four Winds in downtown Oakland. Local news media covered club events, recalled one Laguna. The Four Winds, which met at the Oakland Women's Club in the YMCA/YWCA building, was a common ground for Native people migrating from the reservation and rural homelands during the late 1940s and early 1950s. The wife of a former village governor remembered that Native American employees of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe "were there before the federal government started to relocate the Indians from different reservations."²⁸

Asked about village relations with the surrounding community, she replied, "we had our own recreation hall [a converted boxcar] where our own Indian people put up dances that could not be seen by the white people." They were able, she said, to maintain their "own ways" in the train yards. This woman's daughter remembered "Deer Dinners," tribal meet-

ings, church confirmation parties, and a “teen club” all taking place in the boxcar meeting hall. The teen club used an eight-foot by ten-foot room for gatherings. One Laguna kept several home movies of traditional dances at the village, including the Butterfly Dance with ritual costumes. Another woman explained that Lagunas held “closed” sacred dances as well as “feast” and social dances open to visitors. Residents celebrated the annual “Grab Day” by throwing candies and gifts to the village children from boxcar roofs.²⁹ These and other events recreated the traditions of the home pueblo in New Mexico. They maintained strong cultural ties both within the train yards, and with their home pueblo during their Richmond sojourn.

Additions to the railroad system after 1940 resulted in major concentrations of Native American labor at the growing junctures of urban populations and the railroad. The Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe shops at Richmond employed an increasingly high percentage of the railroad’s laborers. The work force expanded as trackage increased and the land in New Mexico, Arizona, and California became more settled. During 1955, an Indian center formed in Oakland. Some of the same village residents acted as organizers and active members of the center.³⁰

Natives in the village remember using an “electric train” to cross the San Francisco Bay Bridge. Also, a “barge with cars and even a little restaurant” traveled between Point Richmond and San Rafael across San Pablo Bay. The well-known Playland at the Beach in San Francisco was another favorite destination for Laguna laborers and their families. One mother who spent many hours there remembered the now-razed Playland as a “nice place” where many Lagunas liked to spend their days off.³¹

The Native American community in the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Terminal enjoyed an abundant lifestyle. Lagunas relied on many rituals, including the annual watering the flower, in the maintenance of identity. The ability to make excursions into the surrounding community, and return to the familiarity of their replicated home pueblo in the train yards, added to their sense of leading a rich, full life. A Laguna woman born at the pueblo in New Mexico and nurtured in the village, who continues to live near her old Atchison, Topeka and Santa home site, summed up her experience in the Richmond train yards this way: “We had everything!”³²

Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe records are not extant from the years of annual meetings to water the flower, and there are no indications of the company name for the meetings.

According to a company public relations representative, one of two known record sets disappeared during two moves of the Coast Lines offices in Los Angeles. Records were discarded in 1979 and again in 1989. The second set disintegrated in flooding at a company storage location.³⁴ In contrast to the feelings of the Lagunas themselves, in August 6, 1982, the first page of the *Contra Costa Independent* newspaper stated dourly:

There is little information available about the Indian Village. Throughout the years the families who lived there insisted upon their privacy in their daily lives as well as ritual events, meetings and social functions, and were supported in this desire by Santa Fe. The Indians maintained their cultural identity and political allegiance with their New Mexican pueblos; the village was regarded as the place to live while the Indians worked for the railroad, not as a permanent home. When the worker retired the family would return.³⁴

The company moved three modular homes into the village around 1970. All the new houses were claimed by Acoma families. For Lagunas familiar with the agreement of 1880 the Acomas are viewed as not having the same employment and housing rights. Their intervention and claiming of the new houses continues as a source of irritation to some Lagunas.³⁵ A ten-year plan to accommodate the technological changes in railroading did not include the "Indian village" at Richmond. Physical change after World War II, both at the home pueblo and in the train yards, moved slowly to an inexorable end. Only the persistent sense of Laguna identity survived, changed forever by the amalgamation with the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe railroading experience. "Today the Santa Fe Indian Village has been torn apart [and] the last two families, one from the Acoma Pueblo and the other from the Laguna Pueblo, have moved," The *Contra Costa Independent* quoted an Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe official as saying. "One of the two remaining families had been given a cash settlement and was moving to El Sobrante [California]."³⁶ The other resident bought a Richmond city lot to receive the "duplex," and the "boxcars will be removed from the property altogether," the official said, explaining that "Santa Fe needs the property for the continued development of its \$12 million intermodal facility."³⁷

"We hated to go over there" said a Richmond Terminal

supervisor in 1993. "Those last two boxcars just wouldn't give up, the wood kept splintering, and we broke our hammers." When asked what the wrecking crew finally did, he said, "We dug a hole and buried them." He pointed to the center of a broad expanse of train yard asphalt, and said, "right over there!"³⁸

One elderly African American Richmond resident claimed there was "another part" of the village, the St. Johns Apartments, or former "Mexican Village." She said, "That had really been an Indian Village at one time, but it belonged to Santa Fe." When the apartments were built, she said, "a lot of people got upset about it because they said that they had graves over there, and they built on top of that." She concluded with, "I imagine that if they were to start excavating they would find Indian relics down there."³⁹ One of the last village residents, a Laguna, speculated about the demise of her home. "Do you think," she asked, "those scientists [archeologists] will dig my boxcar up someday?" Then she said, "Will they know it was an Indian house?"⁴⁰

Waves of migrant Laguna laborers, augmented with members of the neighboring Acoma Pueblo, left New Mexico, passing in and out of the boxcar houses at the Richmond terminal from 1922 through the mid-1980s, when the "Indian village," disbanded. They adapted themselves selectively to surrounding non-Native American functions, yet clung to tradition, returning often to their pueblos for nurturing celebrations and rituals. Employment by the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe aided that nurturing process with steady work and an affirmed community life in the train yards. Still, the Lagunas steadfastly remained Laguna first, and railroaders second.

Historian Michael McGerr posits that while structurally relevant to the economy, corporations had limited influence on Americans' attitudes and behavior as individuals. A paradox results: "For all their scope, corporations and other bureaucracies have failed to remake their own workers, let alone American culture." To explain this phenomenon, McGerr says, "We need to go beyond our faith in the power of organizations to transform people and culture." He concludes that, "Our nation may well be exceptional not for the power of organization, but for the persisting sense of human agency."⁴¹

One reason for this contradiction may lie in the fact that as creations of the state, corporations are also agencies thereof. For Native American societies, such as that at Laguna Pueblo

and the village at Richmond, the unity of state and community structures was traditionally taken for granted. These amalgams in the twentieth century, however, always remained just slightly at the margins of the larger, state-bound, social and economic systems. That marginality was sometimes self-imposed and maintained as an act of resistance against real and imagined hardships. The immediacy of these hardships, when filtered through history's lens, effects change in strategies for tribal survival and maintenance of identity. Edward Spicer wrote that, "An identity system ... develops independently of those processes by which a total culture pattern, a set of particular customs and beliefs constituting a way of life, is maintained." He maintained, "The *continuity* [italics added] of a people is a phenomenon distinct from the persistence of a particular set of culture traits."⁴²

During the workers' employment at Richmond, the village functioned as a de facto satellite of the distant Laguna Pueblo. Sociologically and psychologically the village remained inextricably a part of the home Pueblo, as if situated along the railroad right-of-way, west of the Rio Grande River in New Mexico. The shared experience of the laborers who occupied the village was a tribute to the cultural persistence of those who watered the flower of the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe contract. In the process, the participants extended the continuity of their communities and expanded their own cultural tradition.

NOTES

1. Merle Armitage, *Operations Santa Fe: Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway System* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1948), 204.
2. Edward H. Spicer commented on Pueblo economics at the time of the railroad's arrival in New Mexico Territory:

With occasional loss of crops due to floods, the necessity arose, especially after the 1880's, for finding additional means of support from time to time. Work on the railroad which was built through the Pueblo country in the 1880's became available as the Anglo cities increased in population and as various kinds of jobs became available in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, Bernalillo, and the many new towns. In addition, the population of every village was slowly but steadily increasing, and there was less and less possibility of new families taking up the land, as a result of the Mexican and Anglo

population expansion through the whole Pueblo area. Outside employment was more and more relied on as a way of making at least a portion of one's living. New skills were acquired and a closer acquaintance with Anglo-American culture steadily developed.

Edward H. Spicer, *Cycles of Conquest: The Impact of Spain, Mexico, and the United States on the Indians of the Southwest, 1533-1960* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1962), 176.

3. Merle Armitage, *Operations Santa Fe: Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway System* (New York: Duell, Sloan & Pearce, 1948), 204.

4. See land surveys by Atlantic & Pacific for the 35th Parallel Route. Santa Fe Collection (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society).

5. Santiago B. and Nellie A. Sarracino, taped and personal interviews, University of California, Berkeley, and Laguna Pueblo, New Mexico, September 1991-May 1993; Ruth Hopper, personal interviews, University of California, Berkeley, September 1991-May 1993. Interviews with Ethel Rogoff, Teresita Garcia, Timothy Anallah, Gerald West, Paul Thomas, Santiago Thomas, Ruby Antonio, Ella Kie, Charles Romero, and others, recorded at Vallejo and Richmond, California, and at Laguna Pueblo between June 1992 and March 1995. Hereinafter referred to as "Personal Interviews."

6. Personal interviews.

7. For an example, see letters requesting copies of a documented contract, written by the Sacramento Agency, Bureau of Indian Affairs, on behalf of Acoma residents at the Richmond Village. Record Group: 75/BIA, Subgroup: Sacramento Area Office, Series: Coded Central Files 1910-1958, Box: 7, Folder: 039 Acoma Pueblo (National Archives, Pacific-Sierra Region, San Bruno, California).

8. Frederick Webb Hodge, ed., *Handbook of North American Indians North of Mexico, Part 1*, Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, Bulletin 30 (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1907), 752. The 1993 acreage under Laguna tribal control is figured at 458,933. Marlita A. Reddy, ed., *Statistical Record of Native North Americans* (Detroit: Gale Research, Inc., 1993), 1036.

9. Personal interviews.

10. Personal interviews.

11. James Quigel, *Labor Conflict in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Ronald L. Fillippelli (New York: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1990), 435-36.

12. Personal interviews.

13. Quigel, *Labor Conflict in the United States: An Encyclopedia*, 435-36.

14. Two Lagunas interviewed recalled the year as being 1943. It is also possible, however, given the arrival of large numbers of workers at Richmond just before World War II, that the vote to organize was made during the period between President Truman's seizure of the railroads in 1946 and the work rule disputes of 1950. See Bryant, Jr., *History of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway*, 324.

15. Personal interviews.
16. Personal interviews.
17. James N. Gregory, *American Exodus: The Dust Bowl Migration and Okie Culture in California* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 176.
18. Ibid.
19. Copies of Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe documents, loaned by former employees, bear the designation of "Colony" as applied to the Richmond Village.
20. Personal interviews.
21. Bryant, Jr., *History of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railway*, 322; Waters, *Steel Trails To Santa Fe*, 327.
22. Ibid.
23. Personal interviews.
24. Personal interviews.
25. Personal interviews.
26. Personal interviews.
27. Personal interviews.
28. Personal interviews.
29. Personal interviews.
30. "Fact Sheet" for the Intertribal Friendship House (n.d.), Community History Project (Oakland, CA: Intertribal Friendship House).
31. Personal interviews.
32. Personal interviews.
33. Personal interviews.
34. "The End of the Indian Village," *Contra Costa Independent*, 6 August 1982.
35. Personal interviews.
36. "The End of the Indian Village," *Contra Costa Independent*, 6 August 1982.
37. Ibid.
38. Personal interviews.
39. Judith K. Dunning, *Harry and Marguerite Williams: Reflections of a Longtime Black Family in Richmond*, Regional Oral History Office, The Bancroft Library (Berkeley: University of California, 1985), 117.
40. Personal interviews.
41. Michael McGerr, "The Persistence of Individualism," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 10 February 1993.
42. Edward H. Spicer, "Persistent Cultural Systems: A Comparative Study of Identity Systems That Can Adapt to Contrasting Environments," *Science* 174 (November 1971): 798.