Chimayó
El Santuario de Chimayó

Chimayó is an unincorporated town less than thirty miles north of Santa Fe, New Mexico, on the High Road to Taos. The Chimayó community is composed of several plazas or placitas that date to the eighteenth century. One of these, Potrero, is known for the Santuario de Nuestro Señor de Esquipulas or simply El Santuario de Chimayó.

In the early 19th Century, the land where the Santuario now stands belonged to Don Bernardo Abeyta, a member of the Penitentes. Sometime around 1810, Don Abeyta had a vision and, as a result, built a chapel to the Christ of Esquipulas (a pilgrimage site in Guatemala where the dirt is said to have healing power). In 1816 the chapel was replaced by the present church. Pilgrims continue to partake of the healing power of the soil that is regularly replenished by priests from the surrounding fields.
Plaza del Cerro

The balance of this report is about the Plaza del Cerro (Plaza by the Hill). We first stopped at Chimayó in 2011. Photographs of El Santuario de Chimayó appear in our report called “Indian Country—May 2011” and a few more pictures from Chimayó are in “Southwest—September 2011.”

But in those visits we didn’t discover the Plaza. So, when we were in northeast New Mexico the next year, we swung through Chimayó specifically to find the Plaza, which we did. One or two of the pictures in the following pages come from that visit. But even then we did not “find” the whole plaza; the entire north side escaped us.

When, in 2015, we decided to see Chimayó again, we checked our photographs and discovered there was a notice about a B&B on one of the buildings in the south side of the Plaza. There we would stay!

The story of our time at Rancho Manzana and our exploration of the Plaza del Cerro we will tell on the following pages. Suffice to say here, however, that we were pointed—by the proprietor of Rancho Manzana, Jodi Apple—to the most amazing guide to the historical plaza and the people who lived in it.

Written by Don J. Usner, who grew up listening to his grandmother tell stories of life in the old plaza, Sabino’s Map is “the best history yet of a northern New Mexico community,” according to a blurb on the back cover. It is the principal source for our reflections on the next pages.
Rancho Manzana, the bed & breakfast operated by Jodi Kent-Apple (not descended from an original resident of the plaza), is located in two of the houses on the south side of the Plaza del Cerro. One had been owned by Rumaldo Ortega, a weaver and leader in the Penitente Brotherhood. The other belonged to Rumaldo’s brother, Victor, who was the proprietor of the General Store and the community’s postmaster. These houses, along with another major Ortega house that contains the Museum, are some of the best restored adobes on the plaza.

In addition to the main structure—which contains Jodi’s home, breakfast room/kitchen, and small apartment for guests—the B&B comprises another purpose-built two rooms for guests about thirty yards away.

In addition to the general pleasant ambience, the breakfasts are unique in our experience. Astoundingly generous, they were different each day of our stay. And then there are the Dackels! They beg to be petted!
Sabino’s Map

Sabino Trujillo’s aim, as Don Usner explains in the book, “was to create a picture that matched his mental image of the old plaza where he grew up in the early decades of the twentieth century.” Usner calls the map “a fascinating piece of folk art.”

As we studied the map and the Plaza del Cerro with the help of the map and the book, we came to realize that there were ins and outs, nooks and crannies to this ancient place, far more than we were capable of ferreting out on our own. For instance, Sabino marked one house, on the northwest corner, as the “first house on the plaza.” Was it really the first? Usner says it might have been (p.113).

Plaza del Cerro did not match the image of a plaza we carried in our heads. It is a group of attached adobe houses (many now dilapidated) arranged in a defensive rectangle, originally with no windows or doors on the outside of the houses. It is unlike the plaza in any number of Mexican villages, with a church on one side and a government building on the other. Instead, it is a place that is and was lived in. Today one cannot see past the trees and weeds growing in the plaza. Indeed, it may have been almost that way in the 1950s when Sabino, remembering his childhood, wrote on his map: “no trees in the plaza.”
Overview of the Plaza del Cerro

The drawing below, from the Historic American Buildings Survey, depicts the plaza as it was 1975. Not all that different from Sabino Trujillo’s memory of the 1920s!

The interior of the Plaza, north and south, is filled with trashy trees and bushes, as the picture indicates. Many of the houses, particularly on the west and the north sides, are irreparable ruins. The tendency to be sad about that is real but, at the same time, the notion that adobe is supposed to melt back into the earth is also real.

Modern locations are in green; older locations are in red.
Plaza del Cerro’s South Side

By asking for directions at the Ortega Weaving Shop, we located the Plaza del Cerro, drove into it and parked opposite the building with the post office sign under a large pine tree. At that time, we had no idea about what we were seeing other than that it was a row of deteriorating adobe buildings with tin roofs.

We learned, by studying Sabino’s Map, that the general store and post office was established in 1907 by Victor Ortega (d.1948).

We also learned that Victor and his thirteen siblings were born—to José Ramón Ortega and his wife, Petrita—in the house at the southeast corner of the Plaza (p.113), which now contains the dining room of Rancho Manzana. The family later moved north to the house presently holding the museum.

If you look closely at the map drawn by Sabino Trujillo you will see the words “pisos de la plaza” in front of the houses on each side (for convenience, it’s marked in red on the more recent map). Don Usner wrote that these walkways were assumed by original residents to be about four yards wide (p.108). Now, of course, cars travel on the old pathways.

The plaza actually was an adobe enclosure designed for protection from attack by plains Indians, of which it is the best surviving example. Behind Victor Ortega’s general store is a curious structure called a torreón. Torreones outside the wall were towers where watchers could give warning to close the narrow gates to the plaza.
Plaza del Cerro’s West Side

The most important feature on the west side of the Plaza is the Oratorio, a small chapel with a bell tower. Originally a private chapel in the home of an 18th-century Ortega family, it was dedicated to San Buenaventura, who still today is the patron saint of the plaza. The Oratorio was the center of the plaza community during the 19th century and the first half of the twentieth.

With the exception of the Oratorio, most of the houses on the west side of the plaza have deteriorated beyond repair, including the one at the northwest corner marked on Sabino’s Map as the “First House on the Plaza” (below).

The house at the southwest corner of the plaza, however, appears to be occupied and in good repair.

Sabino marked this structure as “presumably the first Mission teacher’s living quarters.” The Presbyterian Mission came to the Plaza del Cerro in 1900.
Plaza de Cerro’s North Side

Look again at Sabino’s map. Though the words are too small to read (and even larger they are difficult), the difference in architecture is obvious: fronts of houses on the north side are not in an unbroken line as they are on the other sides.

The north side of the Plaza is not as tidy as are the other sides. Some of the houses obviously are occupied, with outside tables. Parked cars show that the pisos de la plaza are long gone. Some of the houses are abandoned and have fallen into ruin.

José Ramón Ortega moved his large family from the southeast corner house (leaving it for his son, Rumaldo) to the northeast corner house (below) in the late-19th century. Sabino remembered it as having belonged to José Ramon’s daughter, Bonefacia Ortega, who maintained the Oratorio until her death in 1953. It now contains the Chimayó Museum, the entrance to which is from outside the plaza.
The building housing the Chimayó Museum, on the northeast side of the Plaza del Cerro, has been in the Ortega family for generations. It is presently owned by great-grandsons of José Ramón Ortega and leased to the Chimayó Cultural Preservation Association.

The foot bridge leading into the museum crosses the Ortega Ditch or *acequia*, that originally provided irrigation water for the crops growing inside the Plaza del Cerro.
Usner noted that the Presbyterian teachers and preachers, who began to appear in the Plaza in 1898, “were the first dedicated emissaries from the outside world to come to Chimayó” (p. 207). They brought a different kind of religion, better schools, better medicine, more vegetable crops.

The first teacher, Prudence Clark from Eden Prairie, Minnesota, came in 1900. She lived in a house at the southwest corner of the plaza but the first classroom was in a room on the northeast side that was owned by Bonefacia Ortega. See the overview map of the plaza for the location of these houses. The Mission schoolroom collapsed in 1991.

Most of the houses on the east side belonged to the Martinez and the Naranjos families. The families on the plaza were linked in a tangled web of intermarriage. Conversion to the Presbyterian Church produced tension as did defection from the Republication party to the Democrats.

Another type of tension was created in the late 1920s around the Santa Cruz Dam and Irrigation District project. The crops grown inside the plaza were watered via the Ortega Ditch that flowed around the north side. The Martinez Ditch watered the fields outside the plaza to the south.

So the residents of the plaza saw no need for a dam on the Santa Cruz River and opposed the project. In particular, Victor Ortega, who owned the general store on the south side, determined that no new ditch would go through his property. So what became known as the District Ditch just missed his land as it cut through the middle of the southern plaza. The ditch, which flows beneath a house on the southeast corner and flows out at the west end of the camino real, never provided water to the plaza. (See the course of the District Ditch on the overview map.)
From the earliest times, the people of the Plaza del Cerro were weavers. Around 1900, two of the sons of José Ramón Ortega, Nicacio and Reyes, set up weaving shops north of the plaza. Nicacio’s *Ortega’s Weaving Shop* is still very much alive; great-grandchildren are a blessing. Unfortunately, Reyes’ enterprise failed upon his death for lack of heirs.
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