

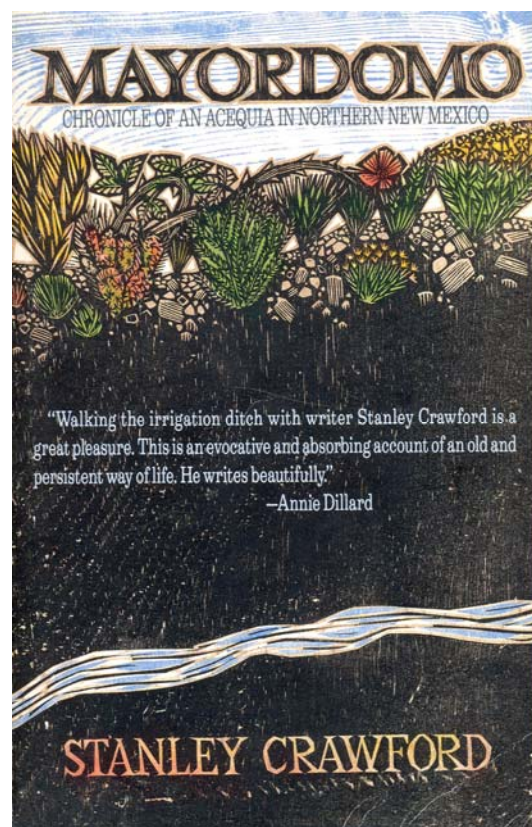
title **MAYORDOMO**

author **Stanley Crawford**
a New Mexican author
<http://unmpress.unm.edu/BrowseBooks2.php?author=Stanley++Crawford>

category Personal account of managing a community irrigation ditch in New Mexico

publisher Anchor Books / Doubleday
1989 trade paperback edition, 229 pages
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first published by University of New Mexico Press in 1988
<http://unmpress.unm.edu/>

of note Won the 1988 Western States Book Award for Creative Nonfiction
<http://www.westaf.org/book-pastwinners.php>



who should be interested in this book?

Anyone interested in water management at the micro level (a small water users group) and how various other water users on the same river interact, dispersed with local history of the northern New Mexico area. Sprinkled in the narrative, that has the rhythm of one year in the irrigation / cropping cycle, are wisdom, compassion, and respect for neighbours whom we exist with and rely upon.

why read this book?

A unique look at a very old system of water management and irrigation, with all the problems and rewards that come when working with a group of users with their individual needs and desires. Anyone interested in some New Mexican history woven into an account of water use and management will find this a very worthwhile read and enjoy Crawford's' outlook on life in general.

There is a list of further reading for those interested in water and irrigation in New Mexico and the influence of the Spanish.

review / outline by Lance Brown, vistadelsol@telus.net

Overview

Crawford makes connections to the reader on a larger level than the simple subject he writes about. How a group of neighbours work together (at least some of the time), how labour is divided, how people respond to crisis, all form part of this account of one year in the life of a mayordomo (ditch manager).

The reviews that follow below cover this book very well, so I will not attempt to add further.

Point of Interest

There is connection with another book, "The Milagro Beanfield War" by John Nichols. Movie viewers may recall a movie of that title a few years ago – a story set in New Mexico that matches a land owner, who tapped into the irrigation ditch to irrigate a small field of beans, against a land developer. Many who enjoy "Mayordomo" may find this a good follow up book.

other review **Publishers Weekly**

Acequias are community irrigation ditches that operate under a patchwork of state, federal and traditional Spanish water laws; the same term applies to the members' association. Each acequia is governed by a commission of three landowners (parciantes) who are assessed in work or money and who obtain water according to the size of their plots of land. The mayordomo is ditch manager and is paid a small salary during the irrigation season. Crawford records one year in the life of a small acequia (30 members) while he was mayordomo ; the season begins with work crews clearing the ditch in March. This is a low-key account of interdependence and cooperation in an isolated community, mainly Hispanic. The mayordomo is responsible for keeping the ditch clear of debris, making sure each parciante gets his share of water and rationing water in dry seasons. Both the setting and the hard manual labor reflect the past, recalling the earliest settlers who performed the same tasks. Crawford has written an elegant piece of Western Americana. Mayordomo won the 1988 Western States Book Award for Creative Nonfiction.

other review **Library Journal**, Evelyn G. Callaway-Helm, Sun City Lib., Ariz.

Crawford writes with concern about the potential effect of new water laws on a close-knit Hispanic community currently operating their irrigation ditch (or acequia) under traditional Spanish laws. Fed only by melting snow, the Acequia de la Jara is of central importance to the landowners in this hilly area of sparse rainfall, for their crops depend on it. Overseeing maintenance and fair usage of the ditch is thus crucial, and following a centuries-old custom Crawford was elected mayordomo to oversee its welfare. A lucid, finely detailed account of a way of life in Western America that may be coming to an end. Winner of the 1988 Western States Book Award for creative nonfiction.

article **Sunset Magazine**, December 1997 "An Irrigation Ditch Runs Through It", by Peter Fish

All the way from Santa Fe, I am nervous about the ditch. You make a pilgrimage to a favored literary site, you set yourself up for disappointment. John Steinbeck's Cannery Row vanished long ago. A visit to Hannibal, Missouri, evokes Mark Twain less than it does musings about urban renewal. By the time I reach Stanley Crawford's farm, I'm fretful.

Stanley Crawford is a soft-spoken 60-year old who raises garlic and writes books. He wrote *Mayordomo*, which is about an irrigation ditch and so much more. It is a volume I press on people if they show any interest in New Mexico, water, literature, or life.

"I was trying to write a novel," Crawford says of the book's genesis. "The fiction I was writing was less interesting than the life I was leading."

The life was one that Crawford and his wife, Rose Mary, adopted in the 1970s, when they moved to this mountain valley between Santa Fe and Taos. Having been expatriates in Europe for a few years, the Crawfords were hungry for community. Their new home - nameless in his books and therefore nameless here - was a traditional agricultural village. Residents viewed the newcomers with mixed feelings. As Crawford puts it, "They thought, 'Thank God, some young people are moving to the village. But you're not the right young people.'" Still, the Crawfords built an adobe house, began a farm, raised their children.

They became accepted enough that Crawford was awarded a term as mayordomo - ditch boss - of the local irrigation ditch, the Acequia de la Jara. He says, "I felt totally out of my depth."

We head up a dirt bank to the acequia. I've brought a copy of Mayordomo for Crawford to sign, and I thumb to a favorite passage, about rebuilding a ditch dam:

"The moment is luminous and transparent: boys and men working together in the dancing reflections of the water to build that most essential structure, the beaver dam. And at this sweeping bend in the river course overhung by clumps of cottonwood and a clear blue sky, with the still slanting sunlight on the glaring white ribbons of sand and bleached rocks along the banks, we work to the alpine sounds of rushing water. ... And later perhaps we will remember only that we built a beaver dam to bring water to our gardens, in the way people have built them all over the world for thousands of years, and that we came home wet and aching and satisfied far beyond what we could easily explain to those who weren't there."

At the top of the embankment, water flows in a 3-foot-wide ditch.

"So," I say, "there it is."

"Yes," Crawford says.

It is no disappointment. The Acequia de la Jara flows thin, yes. But it flows as deep, as beautiful, as it did on the page.