

Canned Corn and River Water

BY BRENDA MANTZ

The year was 1970, and like many of our generation we'd declared our independence from a society that had elected Richard Nixon and, just that spring, opened fire on students at Kent State. We headed west in a VW bus, stopping overnight in Hillsboro, Virginia, where Stephen's parents lived, so he could pick up his motorcycles. Neither of the bikes ran, but he didn't want to leave anything behind. The next morning Stephen strapped the bikes to the top of the VW, and we were off again. At night we stopped in parking lots and warmed dinners of beans and bologna over a sterno heater, then slept huddled together, more for warmth than fondness. After just a few days on the road, the bus reeked of dirty clothes, bologna, and sterno.

The plan had been to drive to California and make a life for ourselves among the artists and musicians who would befriend us there. We made it as far as Denver before we were brought to a standstill by a combination of bad weather and a shortage of funds. With no money for gas, we parked on a side street. During the day we wandered around Denver. We ice-skated at a downtown rink and panhandled. We spent hours in the Zodiac drinking coffee supplied for free by the owner, Joe, who had taken pity on us. At night we returned to the bus to sleep. On really cold nights Joe let us sleep on the floor of the coffeehouse after he closed up. We used Stephen's sheepskin vest as a pillow. We rewarded Joe by eating his whipped cream. We were always hungry.

Stephen devised a new plan. We would buy tools and then drive to New Mexico where we could become useful members of a commune with our own hatchet, saw and hammer. We traded both bikes and the broken-down VW for a 1959 Triumph TR3. We panhandled, sold our blood, borrowed a little money from Joe, and headed to New Mexico. The trip was silent and unremarkable except for one terrifying moment when the hood of the TR3 flew off, cracked our windshield, and sailed over our heads before nearly killing a family of four that was driving behind us. Relieved to be alive, they helped us tie the hood back on with the same straps that had held the motorcycles down.

In Taos strangers introduced us to the hospitality and the cuisine of northern New Mexico. A young couple found us wandering around the plaza after the shops had closed and

invited us to sleep on their floor. After feeding us a breakfast of huevos rancheros, they directed us to a small group of hippies living in what could only generously be called a commune next to the Rio Grande, just south of Taos in Embudo. As we traveled south on Highway 68, the cliffs crowded me on the left, and the Rio Grande Valley opened up on the right. Through the cracked windshield, beyond the river, I saw a group of small cabins gathered around a larger building.

This wasn't the kind of commune that is made up of idealistic hippies in geodesic domes, raising their own food and having mudding parties. There were communes like that—Lama, New Buffalo, and Morningstar—but this was really a collection of cabins inhabited by a bunch of strangers with nothing more in common than empty pockets and a distrust of authority. There were ten of us. Most of the men carried guns, and they were kinder to their dogs than they were to their old ladies. Alan and Frank were the leaders. It took me a few days to get accustomed to the sight of Frank roaming around the grounds with a pistol in his hand. He was tall and wiry, with long curly black hair and a beard. Alan was shorter but solid, with close-cropped blond hair. He looked like he had just gotten out of prison or the army.

There were six cabins connected to the main house by a wooden walkway, and Alan assigned us one of the small cabins behind the main house. It had a narrow bed, a table with one chair, and a stove made from an oil drum. The cabin was freezing in the morning. Since I woke up first, I would get up and start the fire using brush and piñon wood. The one window looked out on the rocky hills. I passed the days wandering along the trails that ran behind the cabins.

The commune was close to where the Rio Embudo and the Rio Grande merged. There the river was too swift for swimming, but I tried in vain to clean myself in the cold water. I couldn't scrub away the grime that stained my skin. My hair was tangled and matted. My breath stank. I was pregnant, and my belly swelled under my loose-fitting dress as the baby grew inside of me.

The long-neglected apple trees behind our cabin still produced fruit. On warm days, when the sun warmed the rocks, I sat on them, eating apples and watching the clouds. I was only twenty years old. Had I looked into a mirror, I would have seen the reflection of a much older woman, but I didn't own a mirror.

Once a week I walked to the post office in Embudo. My Aunt Gladys sent me money orders c/o General Delivery. Most of the money was used to buy food stamps, but if there was



Sad Girl, Taos, New Mexico, 1969. Douglas Magnus, Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), neg. no. HP.2011.28.10.

any left, we treated ourselves to hot dogs and chili at the A&W Root Beer stand just south of the plaza.

Like more than 800 other hippies in and around Taos, we did not hesitate to accept federal food stamps to supplement our meager diet. Under the food stamp laws, a “household” could be “any group of persons who live in the same unit, share food costs, and eat together.” That fit our “commune,” so we were able to apply for and receive food stamps. We faced opposition from civic leaders upset about the influx of hippies in northern New Mexico. The citizens were angry about our appearance and their perception of our sexual mores and drug use, but what really incensed them was the idea of our accepting food stamps from the same establishment we had denounced. They raised such an uproar that the governor of New Mexico, David Cargo, came to Taos to listen to their complaints. The food stamp rules were tightened, but it was still possible to buy them. The cost of the stamps was based on the number of people in the household and their combined

income. We were allowed to purchase \$108 worth of food stamps per month for \$18.

Even with access to food stamps, commune fare was plain, paltry, and, for me, inedible. Dinner was usually a stew cooked in a kettle that hung over the hearth. Cinders from the fire rose and settled back into the kettle, giving the stew a smoky flavor. The taste sickened me. There was no other way to warm the food, so I ate most of my meals cold. My diet consisted almost entirely of cold canned corn purchased with food stamps at the little store in Dixon. I was sick all the time. I never knew whether it was my pregnancy making me sick or the water from the Rio Grande, but cinder-flavored food made me sicker. I lost the baby.

After a year of canned corn and river water, I said goodbye to Embudo. The wind whipped my hair as we drove away in the open car.

A few years ago I returned to Embudo and arrived at the site of the old commune after a long day of traveling. I was



Road along the Rio Grande River in Embudo Canyon, New Mexico, by T. Harmon Parkhurst, ca. 1925-45. Courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), Neg. No. 067895.

tired. I parked my rental car between the river and what was once the main house and looked around. It had changed. The garage where Steve and I had worked on the old TR3 was now a restaurant. But other landmarks were unmistakable: the Rio Grande, the old bridge, the big house where I stirred stews over an open hearth, the foundation of our cabin, the dirt road that led up the canyon, and the spot where Steve had buried our baby's fetus.

A cactus grew there now. I felt the need to perform some kind of ceremony—some act of reconciliation. I spoke a prayer. I asked for forgiveness. I took some pictures. I walked to the tiny gallery that was once a barn and told a stranger I was back. She listened without much interest as I told her much more than she wanted to hear, but I needed to tell someone what had happened there. The woman told me her name was Lisa Law. She was selling copies of her book, *Flashing on the Sixties*. It was a pictorial history. I bought a copy—it was the least I could do. Lisa inscribed the book: "Brenda . . . you were a part of this." I guess she had been listening. As I drove away from Embudo, the rain began to fall. "Rain is a good thing," I said out loud. "It has been a dry time. Rain is good." As I drove up Highway 68 toward Taos, a rainbow appeared. One end of the rainbow grew out of the mesa on my left. The other end seemed to touch Taos Mountain. The rainbow formed a giant arch for me to pass through. I decided it was a good sign. ■

Brenda Mantz divides her time between the northern Virginia suburbs and the Maryland shore. She regularly attends the Taos Summer Writers' Conference and is working on a memoir about her time in Embudo. Her first novel, *Pungo Creek*, was inspired by her childhood on Pungo Creek in rural North Carolina where she grew up in a house shared by three generations. She has also written a mystery novel, *Lilly's Tattoo*, and a book of poetry, *Reunion*. Her books are available at Amazon.com.