

# THE ANCIENT CULTURAL HISTORY OF “THE MATANZA”

by Marcella Trujillo Melendez

Beginning over 350 years ago and continuing throughout the first part of this century, rural New Mexican families raised a family pig for the purpose of butchering it in the traditional *matanza*, a public ritual which is still practiced by some families to this day. The question is, where did this practice have its start?

A search for the historical roots of the *matanza* tradition leads one across the ocean, back to around 500 B.C. in Spain, when Celtic tribes occupied that part of the world. Pigs were known to be important to the Celts who would carve granite statues that looked like pigs to be used as tombstones and territorial markers.

However, between the years 711 and 1492, the period during which Spain was under Moorish rule, the *matanza* took on greater significance; it became the symbol of political and religious resistance. The pig became the line of demarcation which separated the Christian Spaniards from their conquerors. Spaniards loved pork while the Moors, like the Jews, rejected pork because of religious dietary reasons.

The pig came to be known as a *marrano*, a word derived from an Arabic root meaning “prohibited thing,” or “outsider.”

Catholic Spain fought back for seven centuries, finally defeating the Moors in January 1492 and then, two months later, issuing an edict to expel the Jews .

*La Matanza* has been part of the cultural life in Hispanic New Mexico for as long as anyone can remember. It arrived with the first Spanish colonies.

Before electricity was available to rural New Mexicans, the *matanza* was a practical way of feeding the villagers. Each family fattened their own pig and during the winter months, when fresh food and house flies were scarce, the villagers would gather nearly every weekend at the home where the *matanza* was being held.

After a full day of eating, visiting, singing and celebrating, what was left of the pig was divided among the families of the village. Those unable to attend received a package of *chicarrones*, *carne adobada*, *burritos* and red *matanza chile*. There were no leftovers to spoil.

Good eating was only one of the benefits derived from *la matanza*. As the villagers rotated from house to house throughout the winter months, assuring everyone plenty of fresh meat, they also received something much more valuable: the intangible, emotional and spiritual good resulting from the camaraderie and entertainment which are part and parcel of the *matanza*.

Today, with electricity, refrigerators, freezers, supermarkets, cars and freeways available to everyone, need for fresh food is no longer the reason for having a *matanza*. In the process of having achieved affluence and self-reliance, we find ourselves with a great spiritual hunger which can still be easily satisfied through the kind of camaraderie that comes with *la matanza*.

The *matanza* remains a bridge to the past which connects the present and future generations to our ancestors. For hundreds of years some families have been passing on their treasured *matanza* equipment such as the *jarrias*, giant copper kettles which are an indispensable *matanza* utensil, to a family member who is entrusted to make it available for use to other family members and finally to pass it on to the younger generation, thereby perpetuating the tradition.

At this time in history, it is apparent that the *matanza* is much needed as a symbol of resistance, not to people, but to those attitudes of selfishness and self-centeredness that threaten the values most important to Hispanics: love of God, love of family and love of life.

Long live *la matanza*!

NMGS member Marcella Trujillo Melendez wrote this article for the *Genealogist* from her current home in Culver City, CA. She was born in Bosque, New Mexico at a time when the *matanza* was still a dominant part of life, and bases much of her information for this article on first-hand experience and observation. She currently works as a reporter for *La Cruz de California*, an independent monthly Spanish language newspaper which is distributed throughout Southern California and Baja California. Her autobiography, which describes the customs, traditions and daily life of growing up in Bosque in the 1940s, is included in a book titled *Prodigal Daughters*, a collection of women’s stories edited by Donna Steichen. The book is available from Ignatius Press, P.O. Box 1339, Fort Collins, CO 80522-1339 or through [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).