

# A Timeless Ceremony

by Lisa Waterman Gray - Potpourri, A Magazine of the Literary Arts – Summer 2003

A solo car trip of 13 hours has brought me here to experience a ceremony with a 1,000-year history. No amount of fatigue will keep me away.

Morning has dawned bright, crisp and clear. A small, hushed crowd of visitors watches as a willowy, fair-haired Anglo padre presides over the quiet sanctuary of San Geronimo Chapel. Statues of Mother Mary and the saints, clothed in spring green gowns, gaze toward the small congregation from their sacred alcoves.

Pueblo residents pray from diminutive dark pews. A small chorus of voices, one slightly off-key, seeps through the ancient choir loft above us. The padre finishes the service and ushers everyone to the courtyard. They proceed toward the race path, where a crowd slowly gathers.

On May 3 and September 30 of each year the men of the pueblo's Red Willow tribe run a relay race – the Santa Cruz Foot Race - that pits those from the north side of the river against those from the south side. The race has no winners or losers. Rather, it is a kind of prayer - a prayer that those who live on pueblo lands do not share with the outside world. The race is considered a religious ceremony.

It was very difficult leaving my camera equipment behind. But as with all ceremonial events at the pueblo, taking photographs during a race is strictly forbidden in order to maintain the sacredness of the event.

I feel as if I have stepped back in time as I watch the runners congregate at either end of the race path. They wear multi-colored loincloths. Wispy feathers cling to their skin that is painted in geometric patterns of white, ash, and clay. Ribbons wrap some of the runners' braids and ponytails. Feathers hang from the crown of other heads, adorning their jet-black flowing tresses.

Pueblo women, draped in brilliant fringed shawls, stand tall in their white moccasin boots, lining second and third floor rooftops. Their children stand close beside them. The women's costumes create a patchwork blanket of color against warm adobe, misty blue mountain peaks, and a cobalt sky. Sterling silver sparkles and turquoise blinks from handcrafted bracelets and necklaces. I want so badly to take a picture, but I will have to commit this ancient scene to memory instead.

The relay race begins with runners that travel two-by-two. Bare feet slap the dusty path. Pre-school boys run alongside adolescents and adults. Few men break a sweat in the chilly morning air.

A steady gaze and single-minded focus etch the runners' faces. Their chests heave and their legs pump as they race from one end of the path to the other. Hundreds of neighbors and visitors watch the spectacle. Some runners make eye contact with us. Others focus only on their goal.

The women signal their approval and encouragement with high-pitched trilling sounds that split the air, a sound that is as old as the race, itself.

Village elders stand along either side of the race path, waving small leafy branches behind the passing runners - like gatekeepers at a horse race. One tiny participant hesitates to run through the noisy crowd. A gray-haired village elder abandons his post to take the youngster's hand and runs with him to the finish line.

Individual runners pass the crowd once, twice, three or four times before they stop.

As the last runner reaches the end of the relay, race participants from both teams gather for their celebratory procession through the pueblo. Sweet treats rain down on the spent runners, as neighbors throw handfuls of candy at them. Young boys pounce excitedly on the bounty. For the older runners the race itself is most important, but they graciously fill their sacks as well.

The procession slowly crosses the river and winds its way through narrow alleyways at the south side of the pueblo and onlookers follow. The last of the candy flies through the air as runners disperse.

My fatigue forgotten, I flash back on the mental snapshots I have carefully committed to memory. These photographs will never get lost in a drawer.