THE COLORADO CONNECTION

By Jeffrey S. Smith

In 1573, Spain’s King Philip II signed into law the Spanish city planning ordinances. With the twofold purpose of bringing order and predictability to cities governed by Spain, these Laws of the Indies have earned the reputation of being the most comprehensive set of planning ordinances ever devised. Each community was to be established with a rigid grid street pattern radiating out from a central plaza and every detail of village life (from which side of a river to build a city on to where the dump and slaughter house should be located) was painstakingly spelled out.

Today, scholars from various disciplines including anthropology, architecture, geography, history, planning, and sociology have examined how New World cities conform to or deviate from the Laws of the Indies. Aspects of the plaza space in Santa Fe, Taos and Albuquerque, for example, reflect those laws. Ironically, despite the Spanish king’s best efforts to regulate the lives of his citizens, few Spanish cities adhered to more than the spirit of the laws. Moreover, in rural communities throughout the Spanish realm, the Laws of the Indies were largely ignored. As local historian Marc Simmons suggests, “Rural settlements throughout the upper Rio Grande region assumed their shape, in part, as an outgrowth of the region’s peculiar agricultural requirements where plow land was scarce. The long, narrow river valleys and flood plains where Hispano ancestors settled were not conducive to streets with a rigid grid pattern or a large central plaza. Informality characterizes traditional hispano settlements because residents preferred to live closer to their fields. It was mainly during prolonged episodes of Indian raiding that settlers lived in homes around a fortified placita. When raiding and tensions were finally resolved, settlers once again returned to their homes near their fields.

Over multiple generations, hispano settlers expanded to fill the arable lands throughout the upper Rio Grande region. The most pronounced pattern of diffusion was toward the north into northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. By the middle 1800s Hispanic settlements had been established as far north as Colorado’s San Luis Valley and around present-day Trinidad. The Territory of New Mexico had come to cover a sizable piece of land.

In 1861, the U.S. government began reapportioning land as part of creating new states and territories. Land that had once belonged to New Mexico became part of Colorado. For most local residents this amounted to nothing more than a minor political change, and their lives were largely unaffected. For some residents, however, the political change had a profound impact. Communities that straddled the newly defined New Mexico-Colorado border were divided in two. These include Ortiz, Colo./Los Pinos, N.M., and Garcia, Colo./Costilla, N.M.

There are numerous examples of family members and friends who live on opposite sides of the state border but act as if the line was never created and the communities are still one. Long before state boundaries were imposed on local residents, farmers in the region built time-tested gravity-fed acequias to divert surface water from the nearby hills to their croplands. At times, even the U.S. government has overlooked the border between New Mexico and Colorado when it comes to some services offered. For example, there are two ways to get to Los Pinos, N.M.—either through a rough and nearly impassable dirt road from the New Mexico side or over a semi-paved and maintained road from the Colorado side. As such, mail for residents of Los Pinos is processed and delivered to their mailboxes by Colorado-based postal employees (despite the fact that the customers live outside the state of Colorado).

As a cultural geographer, I am particularly intrigued with the interplay between people’s culture and the local physical environment. I find it curious that despite the Spanish crown’s best efforts to regulate the lives of its citizens and establish well-organized cities, local residents did what worked best for them under the local conditions. Had early settlers followed the Laws of the Indies as instructed by the crown, many of the original settlements on the Spanish frontier might have failed because the local topography discouraged grid-shaped communities.

The same can be said for today’s residents who live along the New Mexico-Colorado state border. Even though the U.S. government has imposed a political divide upon the local population, they continue their historical traditions and act as if the divided communities are still one village. Clearly, this is another example of where local circumstances often dictate a different approach than is directed by a distant government.

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Following the contour of the local topography, a number of the local streams and irrigation ditches start in Colorado, pass through New Mexico and end up back on the Colorado. Despite the presence of the state line, farmers on both sides continue to work together and share the water. Each spring they shovel side by side, cleaning the ditch and sharing the water throughout the growing season. As in centuries past, residents cooperate to ensure that everyone has a reliable supply of water. The fact that they live on opposing sides of the state line does not matter.

Not only has the political divide become blurred over water, but residents cross the line for religious reasons as well. While all four communities are blessed with their own Catholic Church, Los Pinos, N.M., and Garcia, Colo., are without a resident priest. The local population journeys to the neighboring state to attend Mass. Likewise, the newly remodeled and renovated morada in Garcia hosts all of the religious ceremonies for los hermanos penitentes on both sides of the state line because Costilla, N.M., lacks its own meeting house for the brotherhood. Political boundaries mean very little when it comes to religion.