

Voices of Dixon: Andy and Patty McComb

From the book
Voices of Dixon:
Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass
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Andy and Patty McComb

Andy (b. 1943)
Embudo Presbyterian Pastor
Community organizer, Builder
Patty (b. 1949)
Midwife, Family Planner, Mediator
Interviewed: September 4, 2004

Early Life

Andy: I'm from Huron, Ohio and have an older sister and a foster brother, both of whom still live in Ohio. I went to high school there and to college in Michigan. Eighty-five people were in my graduating class and probably about 75 of them still live within 30 miles of the high school. That's just the way it is in a small town. We used to go back there every summer because my mom lived there and she was the mayor of the town and we went back every summer to take the kids to Cedar Point, a great amusement park. I left Huron to go to school in Ann Arbor, Michigan, and then I went to Princeton.

Patty: I'm from Springfield, Massachusetts and went to a very big high school with a graduating class of something like 650, then went to the University of Massachusetts. I was the oldest of 5 kids. My father worked for the Post Office.

Andy: My mother was a councilwoman and was also the mayor for a while. She and my grandfather were activists. My grandfather was 6'2", which was huge for that long ago. He owned a grocery store in town and his brother owned a butcher shop. My mother went to Oberlin. She graduated from high school when she was 16 and got into Oberlin and then went to the University of Pennsylvania and got a Master's in Social Work. She had a Master's Degree by the time she was 22. Then she worked in the Settlement Houses in Philadelphia, which is where she met my dad. They got married and then moved back to Ohio. Dad just had a high school degree and he was a machinist and a mechanic and worked for Ford Motor Company. One election time there was a family joke that our family was sitting around the table and someone said "Did you know there were two votes for Norman Thomas in that election?" And my mother said, "Well, one of those was mine." And my grandfather said "and the other one was mine". Huron was 5,000 or 6,000 then. The plant was right next door.

Discovering Dixon

Between my junior and senior year in high school, I came out to Dixon for the first time on a mission trip. Our home church was a sponsor of the Embudo Hospital, so that summer 16 of us came out here. We visited Ghost Ranch; saw Chimayo and visited Dixon. That was in 1960. It was the first time I had ever been here and I just loved it. Then I just kept coming back to New Mexico. Between my junior and senior year in college, I was on College Staff at Ghost Ranch and then after my first year in the seminary I did my summer work in Chimayo at John Hyson School. When I graduated from the seminary I worked in New York City but I came out here during a

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couple of summers to lead seminars at Ghost Ranch. Then I went to Berkeley. But I still had friends in Chimayo and I would come and visit. One of my friends was Margaret Love, who was a friend of Patty.

Patty: I came out in a painted up Volkswagen Bus. I went out to California and then came to New Mexico with Margaret Love. She and I drove across country, back to Massachusetts. She was living in the house I was living in. It was like a whole commune thing. In 1972 Andy and his wife divorced. Andy wrote me a letter and asked me to come out and join him in New Mexico, and fool that I was, I did. So, we started living together. We lived over at the Embudo Station with Dexter and Susan and Bianca, their baby, and five goats. We were living in the little houses there. It was deserted, no rent; they let us just stay there. It was kind of funny having goats just wander in and out of your house all the time.

Andy: We went to the store in Dixon and met Lebeo and asked him if there was a place in Dixon where we could live. He said yes, there was an empty house in the Second Arroyo. We went up there to look at it, contacted the woman who owned it, and rented it for \$10 a month. No water, no electricity, no phone, just an outhouse. There was a well next door. The well was one of those with a bucket. We had a yellow igloo water jug sitting next to the sink. We would drop the bucket into the well, pull it up, and carry it inside to fill the igloo.

Patty: Most people were like that, actually; very few people had running water.

Andy: The people who were here then were Stan and Rosemary Crawford, Tim and Carolyn Thomas, Lem Brown, Connie Duckworth, Tom Seibel, Jack and Annie Whetstone, Patty Nielson, the Rigsbys, and some others. And the Chiltons were here. Ken and Joan McDonald, the Carlyles--they are all still here.

Tim and Carolyn didn't live here then; they used to come and visit. I think they had the property, but they were still teaching in Michigan, so they would go back and forth. But then Carolyn came out and rented a house with running water and everyone in town

would come over to take baths and she would charge them to take a bath. She had a washing machine, too.

Patty: Andy fixed VW engines. I would come home and find parts of engines all over the living room. We just had this little adobe house. I was trained as a family planning specialist and a midwife. I worked as a midwife. I delivered one of Marta Chilton's kids and one of Janet's who lived next door. Up the Second Arroyo where we lived was a whole other community. Tina was from Santa Clara Pueblo. I delivered her child. She gave me a beautiful Santa Clara pot that her mother and grandmother had made for her to give to me. It has a water serpent on it, a symbol of life. She named her daughter Tierra. She lived with Joe Krieger. Ace and Penny lived up that arroyo. I saw Penny around here last year but I don't know where she was living. Ace was the manager of an apartment complex in Berkeley.

Digging Our Own Well

Andy: We decided we should have our own well. I was going to dig it by hand. We had a guy come up who was a water witch; Lebeo recommended him. So he came up with his wands and he said, "right here." It was halfway up the hill, totally dry. We dug there, through caliche; we got down about 20 feet. We had no ladder; you just shimmied your way down and fill up the bucket, and haul it up. Up and down, up and down.

Then Marshall Rigsby said, "Why don't you just dynamite it?" So we drilled holes with an auger and put in four sticks of dynamite and some nitrogen fertilizer. But we didn't have any way of setting it off besides lighting a fuse. So I shimmied down to light the fuse and then climbed out and I put a bedspring over the hole to keep the rocks from flying out. But when it went off, it was like a cannon. The bedspring went up so high you could hardly see it; and the rocks went down all over the neighbors' houses. The whole town came up; people thought it was like an earthquake and it only dug the well about 4 inches deeper so it was a mess. This was up the Texaco

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Arroyo. We never got water. We just put the outhouse over the hole. And then we left.

The First Ambulance Service

When Patty was a midwife, I was an EMT. We had the training through UNM. We had the first certified EMTs and volunteer ambulance service in the whole state. I think there were about 10 or 11 of us that took the course. There was Grace Martinez, me, Carl and Faith Berghofer, Tom Duckworth, and a bunch of other people.

Before that the only ambulance that used to come up here was a hearse from the funeral home in Española and they just had a driver, no attendant. They would just put people in the back and take them to the hospital. But we heard that the driver only got paid if the patients were dead when they arrived at the hospital. If they were alive, they would have to charge the people, but if they were dead the State would pay for it. So the driver would drive around until his passengers died. I think it was true.

One of the reasons we could do it is because the Presbyterian Hospital in Embudo was closed by this time and they had an ambulance left over. So we were able to set up the ambulance service using rooms over at the old hospital. And there was water and we took showers.

Community Development

Andy: We left in 1976. We lived in Los Angeles. Then we moved from LA to Massachusetts and then to New York. I worked with migrant farm workers in New York, but we came out to Dixon two or three summers to visit.

Patty: We went back to Massachusetts when we left LA and lived with my mother till Andy took a job as a community organizer and was a youth minister at a church. And then he was executive director of a new migrant ministry.

Andy: Things were a hassle. I was doing the migrant ministry

work, Patty was at home, and we had three kids. Patty got a master's degree during that time from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. I was working on low-income housing and it was just really bad because there was so much racism towards blacks and Hispanics. The migrant workers were mostly Jamaican, Haitian, and Hispanics from Texas. The Haitians worked on sweet corn, the Jamaicans did apples, and the Tex-Mex did onions. And then there were other workers, Hispanic workers, who did mushrooms at mushroom farms. This was all in New York State. The Jamaicans were not technically migrant workers; they were foreign contract workers, here just to pick apples. They lived in the migrant camps in the apple orchards with sprays and chemicals. I put together an agency to do low income housing and we bought a 50-unit slum that we worked on and rehabilitated. This was just outside of New Paltz, New York and the opposition to it was incredible. My name was in the paper all the time. The white politicians decided they weren't going to let that happen. They had HUD money coming for this project, but if the project didn't work they could use that money for a community center, or even for anything they wanted to if the project didn't work out. So they did everything they could to stop the project. It was bad and the KKK was around.

I was doing all kinds of stuff in New York. I was one of 10 "civilians" (as we were called) on the New York State Legislative Commission on Rural Resources, which plans 10 or 15 years in advance for all the rural legislation in New York. It was bi-partisan and worked with the House and the Senate. We represented different state agencies. I was working with the State Legislature all the time doing long range planning for the state of New York.

Our project for migrants was sponsored by five denominations: Presbyterians, Episcopalians, Methodists, Reformed Church of America, and American Baptists. Then I realized that some of the growers, the rich landowners who owned the migrant housing, were Episcopalians. So we challenged them. For instance, I would go around to raise money for blankets to help people living in that lousy

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housing to cover the holes in the walls or just keep warm. They thought it was great that we could get their migrant workers blankets, but they didn't appreciate it when I asked them to fix the holes in the walls

By the time I left, very little had changed. But it's going OK now. I have a report that says the agency to protect workers is functioning very well. What we tried to do was get people out of the migrant stream and into permanent housing so their kids could go to school. We did build a migrant day care center that became a model for the whole East Coast. They couldn't have day care in church basements any more because they couldn't meet code. So, we actually built a center just for migrant kids and now they've built about five or six more of those using the same building plans.

But finally all that stuff was burning me out. Then Carolyn Thomas called us up one night and said there was a piece of land for sale. I asked if we could see the mountains from the land, and she said yes. So we called the people that night and said "we'll buy it" and we did. This was in 1987; we moved back here in June or July of 1987 with three kids and this house was a wreck.

Back in Dixon

Patty: I got a job at Moby Dickens Book Shop in Taos and Andy worked on the house and then he began doing some part time preaching in Peñasco. We lived in one room and 2 bedrooms. The TV was on a cart in front of the door so to get out of the house you had to wheel the TV in front of the stove.

That was until this place was rebuilt, right? But it was different the first time.

Andy: Well, when we moved into the house we rented for \$10 a month in the Second Arroyo, the first time it rained we discovered a problem with the rock foundation. Those were loose rocks and the builders had just put adobes on top. So, when it rained, the water all came down the hill and through the rocks and went over our floor and out the front door. It was bad. We said, "What are we doing

here? This is totally insane." We stayed four years, but things were different. We were younger. We had a community sauna too that we built by Carolyn's. That's how we got clean because nobody had water so every week, even in the wintertime, we'd fire up the sauna. Maybe 10 people or so would get in the sauna and then we'd jump in the river, through the ice and everything, then back in the sauna. That's how we got clean; it was great. We made wine in 55 gallon barrels, it was awful but we drank it. We used to go to Albuquerque and buy the oak barrels that they made whiskey in and we'd put a gallon and a half of water in them and roll them around and leave them in the sun for about a month and then we'd drink that, and then we made wine in the barrels. It was a crazy time. We'd hang out at the waterfall up at Lem's all summer. Just hang out up there.

In 1987 I did a new church development in Angel Fire. I think I was the construction coordinator for Habitat for Humanity in Taos; I got paid for that. Then I started to do plumbing.

Patty: I stopped working because of health problems and then I started doing mediation as a volunteer. Got trained in that. Then I joined Americorps in Santa Fe and did more mediation, you know, really doing a lot of mediation. I worked abuse and neglect cases for the State as well. And then I liked that so much I decided to go to social work school so I went over to Highlands and got a Master's in Social Work. My first Master's was in philosophy, Eastern Philosophy. I got to see more of the community, the dysfunctional part.

What changes have you seen in the community since 1972?

Patty: I think everyone lived simpler lives. Travel was harder, when anyone would go to Santa Fe, everyone would give them lists of things to buy because it just was harder. The roads were bad, and nobody did it that much. Mostly people stayed in Dixon and shopped at Zellers (with Lebeo working there). They were like the center of the whole community. Some people worked up in Los Alamos, mostly the Hispanics. Then when we came back, more people were working. When we lived here before, the house in the Second Arroyo

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that we were renting for \$10 a month, we bought it for \$1100. That was the scale of things, so you could live really simply.

Andy: And the other thing is, when Connie, who had 3 kids, needed a house because she had just broken up with her husband, the whole community got together and in two days we built Connie a house on Tom Siebel's land. That's right before we moved here. I was out here visiting and I worked on that house. It went from nothing to her moving in two days later. That is what the Anglo community was like. We had work parties. About once a month we'd go to someone's house and work on projects that they were doing. The whole community. We'd have a big potluck. It's amazing how much work would get done with a whole bunch of people in one day. When the Sawyer's built their cabin, we all went up to La Junta Canyon and cut all the trees for the vigas and the log cabin. We hauled them all down there, and we'd have big parties and we built their house.

The Hispanic families weren't hostile, but we were separate. I think Lebeo and Grace Martinez were probably the main connection between the Anglo and Hispanic communities. Patty worked with Hispanics because she was doing this woman's health care program and saw Hispanic women.

Patty: All birth control information was free and most of these women had never been to a doctor because the doctors were men so then they came to us because we were all women. It was a whole series of Birth Control Clinics in Española, Questa, Taos, and Costilla. We traveled all over doing these clinics.

When Andy and I got married, we had our wedding reception at the Catholic Parish Hall and it was probably the first big party in this town that was Anglo and Hispanic together. We had a Spanish band.

Andy: Patty worked in the Hispanic community and so did I and it was really a mixed thing. Lebeo and Grace were there. Irene Gurule helped set up the clinics. And all the hippies were there. I think people were very tolerant of each other then; it was considered kind of an oddity that all these hippies were moving in. As an Anglo

though, you didn't go into Apodaca then; it was the only place you couldn't go. It was off limits, except for the guy who owned Jeannie's property. Can't think of his name.

We had two bars in town--El Bambino and Sol y Lomas. Anglos didn't go to Sol y Lomas. If you did, you were just asking to get beaten up. All the Anglos and cowboys from Ojo Sarco would go to the El Bambino, and there would be fights there. Holly's front building was the bar; Gwen lived in the back, in the house.

So, when we came back, it was much more civilized. A lot of the same people were here but everybody actually worked. I mean before, Monty had his jewelry company and everybody worked for Monty making this brass jewelry. Monty was the big entrepreneur. He owned the rock house in Embudo. That was a sweatshop; Connie worked there. Everybody worked there. Everybody was into jewelry.

Other people made jewelry, too. Carol made jewelry and Carolyn made jewelry, but Monty did the cheap stuff. He made it in mass quantities and sold it at craft fairs. Other than that, nobody really worked. The standard of living was low. We probably lived on less than \$2,000 a year. Electricity was \$3 a month. In the summertime we had lots of food, in the wintertime we just got by. For firewood we would go up on Carson Mesa where BLM had knocked down a bunch of trees so we'd go up in groups and come down with enough wood to heat the houses. We only had wood heat and a wood cook stove.

But when we came back, everybody had jobs. We still had wood stoves and stuff, but there were more gas heaters, there was running water and hot water heaters. I think there was less of a sense of community; no one had house-building parties. But the bar was down there. We used to have a lot of activities down there, Halloween parties for the fire department. Lots of community activities took place at the bar. When we first came here, the Presbyterian Church was pretty much Spanish and people who worked at the hospital. But when we came back, again, a lot had changed.

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Patty: You know when I was doing the clinics, some of the women didn't even speak English, women who had lived here all their lives. But when we came back, pretty much everybody spoke English. Perhaps someone very old still spoke Spanish.

How do you see this community in the future?

Andy: We still have an undercurrent of drug dealers around here, people dying of drugs, low-lifers. We have people moving in paying a lot of money for these houses, most of them are Anglo, they have a lot of money. When we were here the first time, basically Patty worked, and I did Volkswagen repair. Mainly we partied all the time. It was a social happening. I mean we'd go to work parties, work during the day, then have a bonfire and stay up half the night, it was wild times.

Patty: We were younger then and it was so cheap to live here, the land was so cheap, it was easy.

Andy: When I got here I had heard of La Academia. I had done actions with them around the country but when we moved here, they were cold. It was fine to work with them around the country, but don't move into our community. That's what actually happened. There were signs all over "don't sell your land to the gringos". The La Academia people were leading that. They were fine as long as we were doing radical things in Chicago or New York but when we came to Dixon they didn't want anything to do with us. I'd been doing stuff in Berkeley, challenging the church and all that, and they were fine with that, but actually coming into their home towns wasn't acceptable.

When I came the second time, there was a priest here, an older priest. Father Bob. He had two daughters. He became a priest after his wife died. He and I worked together all the time, it was kind of neat. There was also a woman here named Joanne, an ex-nun, who was the parish administrator. The first time we did the sunrise service up on the hill Father Bob and I worked together on it. That had not been done much before because there had been a lot of tension between the Presbyterians and the Catholics. Father Bob,

don't know his last name, he was a mellow guy. Carlos (*Embudo Presbyterian minister before Andy*) had sort of done that, getting people together, but not that much. When I got back here I served the church in Peñasco, but then they asked me to do the Embudo church when Carlos Nuñez left. It was having a hard time. Sometimes there were only about 8 or 10 people going to church. They closed the sanctuary in the winter and they had church in the back rooms. The Mission Building was falling apart; it wasn't used much. There were trees growing out of the parapets because the plaster was cracked; it was really bad. They had no money and very few people and nothing was happening.

The revitalization happened when we started getting youth groups to come here in the summertime from different places and had work camps and did some work on the buildings and that's what started it all.

Patty: I think people realized that they had something worthwhile because all the youth groups were so excited about being in Dixon and helping to renovate these old buildings. They felt it was something important.

Did the hippies revitalize Dixon?

Patty: I don't know. I think the hippies came here and were tolerated. There was always a lot of drug use and alcohol and all that stuff going on so it was like a safe haven for hippies.

Andy: The other thing is there were a lot of people, like Stan, a lot of people who were growing things and that kind of saved the acequia system because some of the Hispanics had just ignored them. Stan and Tom Siebel and other people who were doing the growing put in a lot of energy to save the acequias. And everybody else was tired of it; they grew up with it. They lived in abject poverty, lots of kids, very little education; it was a really hard, hard life. Lebeo said if it hadn't been for the hippies, the store wouldn't have existed. The hippies shopped there, the local Hispanics didn't or they charged and didn't pay.

When we first came here, people were still buying deserted, run

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down houses and fixing them up. Today, people are coming in and buying finished houses; they aren't coming in here to fix up houses, they are coming in here because it's a beautiful place and they pay top dollar to live here. It's really different. Then everybody looked around for abandoned property, an adobe house that had half fallen down, and you'd find some family who would sell it to you for next to nothing. People wanted to put their energy into fixing up the land and fixing up the houses. Today that's not why people are moving here.

Patty: I think in the beginning, people moved here to go back to the land. It was the whole "back to the land" kind of thing. There was a feeling of impending doom, the world was going to end, the government was going to collapse so you needed your own little piece of land so you could survive on your own. There was a lot of that.

Andy: It's impossible now to make your living off the land. Before, people didn't have mortgages, they didn't have many expenses; it was pretty poor existence but they could survive. Now you could never do it just as a farmer. Thinking back on the old adobe houses, and at the time we were here the first time, I'd go into an old house, everybody was putting up wood paneling inside covering up the vigas with drop ceilings. They said, "We don't want to live in dirty adobe houses. We want linoleum on the floors." And from there it went to trailers. It's really interesting. Then the Anglos come in and pull the paneling off; they want vigas.

I could see Dixon getting more and more affluent.