

## Voices of Dixon: Betty Mascareñas

From the book  
**Voices of Dixon:**  
**Oral Histories from the Embudo Valley**  
Interviews and Editing by Harvey Frauenglass  
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**Betty Mascareñas**

(b. 1932)  
Public Health Nurse (Retired)  
Interviewed November 9, 2002

### North Dakota

I grew up in North Dakota. I was born in 1932, a Depression baby. I grew up in the little town of Webster. It had two blocks of houses. I used to go to sleep at night counting how many people were in our town. There were about 82 people when I started counting, but as people went away to college or the Army, the number got smaller. We had a school, first grade through twelfth. In those days people deplored the fact that we had such small classes. There were four in my high school graduating class. But let me tell you, I think we were the luckiest students in the world; we were tutored! And we had proms, high school graduation, commencement addresses, PTA, the whole thing.

My father had a little store in town and it sold everything. He sold beer, he had a lunch counter, he had a barbershop. My brother and I

would go down after school and on weekends to clean, wash the dishes. Dad was interested in medicine and had always wanted to be a doctor. His store also had a drug counter and a special license from the state of North Dakota to sell medications. I used to stock the shelves. That's where I first got interested in becoming a nurse. I wore out two little toy nurse's kits. I still have a doll whose teeth are crooked in her mouth from me forcing in my thermometer to take her temperature. Whenever I look at that doll I remember the fun I had playing nurse and hospital. I just grew up knowing I was going to be a nurse.

The church was also very important. There was a small Presbyterian Church in town and my mom was the Sunday school teacher. Of course we went to Sunday School every Sunday, and to church every other Sunday because the minister served three other churches besides ours. One Sunday a woman came to our Sunday School and spoke about missionary service in the hospitals in the Southwest. Her husband was a doctor at a missionary hospital in Ganado in Arizona, Dr. Spinning, and since he was so busy because of the shortage of doctors during the war she traveled for him. I was about ten and when she spoke about the great need for missionaries her words burned in my heart. I wanted to be part of that. But how could that be when I was going to be a nurse? Then one day coming home from school a couple of months later I remember skipping down an embankment and crossing the highway to my house and suddenly thinking, 'Well, for heaven sakes, I can do both! I can be a nurse and a missionary.' That was a revelation to me and at that young age I decided what I was going to do. I'm sure I was very idealistic. (Laughs.)

I went to junior and senior high camps sponsored by the church and that put us in touch with foreign missions and national missions. I decided to be involved with national missions and corresponded with the Board of National Missions and kept up contact with them all through college.

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### Baccalaureate In Nursing

I chose Jamestown College, a Presbyterian college and the only college in North Dakota that offered a full four-year program leading to a baccalaureate in nursing. And since we went to school year-round, it was in essence five years of schooling. Our junior year involved affiliation with other institutions. I spent nine months at Cook County Hospital in Chicago doing special training in procedures that our little hospital couldn't offer. I spent three months in Pueblo, Colorado training in psychiatric nursing. During that time a friend and I took a weekend bus trip down to New Mexico to visit my aunt, my mother's sister, who taught at the Presbyterian School in Chimayo. She met us in Santa Fe, and it was such a treat! To me the Southwest was totally another world.

Then I found out that not far from Chimayo was the Presbyterian mission hospital in Embudo. Now I had a decision to make: should I go to the mission hospital in Ganado or to Embudo? Aunt Lois took me and my friend to visit the hospital in Embudo. Remember, this was my junior year and I had a good idea of what nursing was about. I found that nurses could do everything at Embudo. They had outpatient clinics, they had pediatrics, a lot of obstetrics, they did surgery. Nurses scrubbed in for surgery. It was exactly what I wanted to do. So I let the Mission Board know what I wanted.

### Dixon I

On October 1, 1954, I arrived in Lamy on a little milk train out of Kansas City and then was bussed to Santa Fe. The nurses' rooms were in what used to be the old clinic. There was good fellowship, or you could say, "girl-ship" because the only man on campus was Eloy Duran, the maintenance man. There were two women doctors, Dr. Bowen and Dr. Milliken, and probably eight nurses. And of those eight nurses, I think four of us had our baccalaureate degrees. We were well prepared. Miss May, the director of nursing, said we were the best staff she had ever had.

On my first day of work Dr Bowen drove me and another nurse

up over the Dixon hill to the clinic in Holman. It was a one-lane dirt road with steep drop-offs around the curves. Dr Bowen leaned on the horn at each curve just in case another car was coming. When we heard a horn, she would pull over to let that car pass. That was my introduction to driving in the mountains of northern New Mexico. But I still remember the golden cottonwoods and the golden aspens and the stream beside the road and the high mountains in every direction. I remember feeling so lucky to be in this place, which was so different from where I grew up on the flat plains of North Dakota.

The Holman clinic was in a corner of the gymnasium of the Holman Presbyterian Mission School. There was a dressing room off the stage, which was our examining room. It had an examining table, shelves around the walls with gallons of cough syrup, antacids, big jars of pills, and a counter where we could dispense and label drugs. As I got into the whole nursing practice at the hospital and the clinics, I found that we did everything I had learned. First we would see the patient in the clinic where it would be determined whether surgery was needed, or someone was going to have a baby. Then they would come into the hospital and you would admit them. You would give the pre-op medication and prepare them the night before for the surgery. Next day you would scrub in for the surgery. Afterwards you would do the recovery, help them get through the anesthesia and take care of them during the post-operative period. Sometimes we would make home visits. And then we would see them in clinic again.

I also saw some patient diagnoses that I had not seen at our little hospital in North Dakota, or in Cook County Hospital, or in Pueblo. I saw my only case of Lupus. We saw awful cases of amoebic dysentery. In those times, in the fifties, people in the villages were still using ditch water for drinking, and they didn't boil it. The children would come in with their fontanels, the little tops of their heads sunken in, their eyes sunken in, and dry, so dry. We would give them fluids right away and in five or six hours they were perking up, getting better.

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Along with all that kind of nursing care we did public health teaching, teaching about proper nutrition, about boiling drinking water. And it was during that time that the water associations started being formed in New Mexico. My future father-in-law, Reverend Tomás Atencio, was instrumental in starting the Dixon Community Water Association. We had a wonderful working relationship with the New Mexico Health Department. When I went back to school in Minnesota for a year to become certified in public health, they talked about the innovative ideas of the New Mexico Health Department, including working with the community water associations. The Department provided the technical know-how and the villages provided the labor to dig the ditches to lay the water lines. There were no backhoes around then. It is interesting to me that one of Reverend Atencio's sons, Amos, is president of the Dixon Water Association.

### Nursing in Los Angeles

I got to know Reverend Atencio when he was a patient at the hospital. I loved his sense of humor. I remember seeing him in church once after he had been very ill. I went up to him after the service and asked "Reverend Atencio, how are you?" He said, "I'm eatable, I'm eatable." To me this meant that he was beginning to eat again. Then Tomás Junior came along. Actually, when I met him I was working in Mora as a public health nurse. I had gone to University of Minnesota on a federal grant with the stipulation that I would work two years in a "rural area" after I was certified. That was fine with me because that's what I was interested in. Then Tomás and I married, in 1960, and we went to Los Angeles where Tomás attended USC and got his master's in social work. I worked the first year as a nurse at Hollywood Presbyterian Hospital. I just couldn't get away from being a Presbyterian.

It was nothing like Embudo, but I did see some well-known people. Robert Taylor was one. I worked in the lab and I drew blood from the actor who played in "Gone With the Wind"—Clark Gable.

Tomás always used to tell people "Betty drew blood from Clark Gable and he died." That man had blood vessels like garden hoses and he was such a tall man that they had to get a special hospital bed for him. You didn't realize how tall he was when you saw him in the movies. He had just finished a movie with the mustang scene in it and had worked so hard getting it the way he wanted it that he had a heart attack. Everybody in the lab took turns going up to draw blood from him. Poor guy. When it was my turn I missed the vein and I had to poke him twice, even as big as those veins were. And those days you had glass syringes, not the disposable plastic ones; as soon as you drew the blood and squirted it into the vial, you had to rinse out the syringe so the blood wouldn't clot. I stepped into his bathroom to do this, to rinse the syringe, and I snuck a look at him. And he was looking right at me, just staring right at me. I just melted.

That was the high point of my nursing career in Los Angeles. (Laughs) The next year our daughter was born and we scraped by on loans and student aid. We were so poor that we saved up for a month to buy a six-pack of beer and a hairbrush for me. That was our treat.

### Dixon II

Tomás finished his master's and we came back to Dixon in 1962. He took a position as medical social worker at Embudo Hospital. Our second daughter was born, fourteen months after her sister. At first we lived with Tomás's parents in the house next to the Presbyterian Church. Then in 1964 we bought this humble adobe. It had not been lived in for years. Windows were broken. Rats were running around. But we cleaned it up and added on. What is now the living room was the original house. Local people were very happy that Tomás had come back. Many times young people would go out and get their education and never come back—it was a brain drain. Tomás became very interested in preserving local culture. He felt that with the influx of outsiders there was a danger the history and traditions and language of northern New Mexico would be lost. He could see changes and it really bothered him. He would sit with local

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people on the bench in front of Zeller's store talking about culture and traditions and the loss of the old ways. Then he got an offer to head the migrant workers program at University of Colorado and we moved to Boulder for about a year and a half.

### La Academia\*

When we came back things really started to happen with Academia. Tomás would wake up early in the morning and he would say, "You know, I was thinking..." and it was always about how to get the oral histories. One thing led to another. Working with Facundo Valdez, a social worker in Taos, and Tony Medina, who ran the clinic in Mora—he was also a social worker and a Presbyterian Minister—they got a grant from the Presbyterian Church. They bought a justifying typewriter—we didn't have computers then, this was in the late sixties and early seventies--and they bought tape recorders. They enlisted young people, mostly young men but some girls, too, to go to their families in the villages---Dixon, Chimayo, Taos, villages all around here, and record their stories. These were people in their seventies, and they remembered from way back how life used to be. They talked about acequias, then and now, about politics, about the land grants, about weddings and funerals, how people celebrated a wedding, a funeral, a baptism. They talked about descansos, the places you see along the road where people have died. They talked about their love and feeling for the land. It wasn't just something material you could buy and sell.

Mostly this was in Spanish, though some was in English. We had one or two people working here, back in our torreón, typing up the material from the tapes. Then they edited the material and put it all together in a book, in Spanish, called *Entre Verde y Seco*. On the cover of *Entre Verde y Seco* is a juniper, part green and part dead. All the way through the book are photographs of people who were interviewed, and line drawings and sketches. This was a very fertile, creative time for us. I never knew who was going to be here for the next meal. I just kept chile and beans cooking all the time, and

tortillas. In the summer we had fresh greens from our garden, but the staples were always chile and tortillas. My tortillas weren't round; their shape was more like the map of the United States. But they were edible. There were always people in the house, all kinds of people, from the town drunk to the moderator of the Presbyterian Church. Once there was a representative of President John F. Kennedy who was very interested in the social action program. Paolo Freire, a Brazilian intellectual, was another one who stayed at our house. And your neighbor Estevan Arellano was very much involved.

For a while, one aspect of Academia was the "poison pen." They wrote against people who took on what they called Anglo ways—materialism, greed, the general outside culture. What they were finding was that many middle-aged Hispanics wanted to be middle-class Americans. They were not speaking Spanish and were not upholding their own culture. The people in Academia were afraid the whole Spanish culture of New Mexico was going to be lost. They also found that there was a strong tie between the grandparents and kids up in the villages. The grandparents were teaching the kids Spanish, and giving them a sense of pride in their heritage. I think that one of the things that bothered Tomás was that people weren't proud to be who they were. They weren't proud of their heritage. Tomás was proud of who he was, and rightly so! I'm proud of my North Dakota heritage, my Swedish, German, Norwegian stuff. (Laughs) I still like lefse, that good Norwegian food.

### Peace Corps and Vista

Shortly after we got back from California, Peace Corps volunteers were coming to Dixon for training for service in South America. Tomás got involved in the Peace Corps training. These were delightful, energetic young people and we made some good friends. Many people in Dixon seemed to get involved with the Peace Corps training. Later, when we came back from Boulder, Vista volunteers came to Dixon. This was the domestic Peace Corps. Tomás was

involved in placing the volunteers in the various villages. I think Vista people were involved in the Dixon volunteer fire department. They did surveys and collected information, and they put out information on when meetings were being held. (Aaron Griego has information about Vista help with the Fire Department. I think he was fire chief at that time.)

And where did the Vista congregate? I have no idea how the message would get out, but the two Vistas from Dixon would show up at our house and half an hour later the guys from Mora were here, and then the Vistas from Peñasco, and all of sudden we had a whole houseful of Vista volunteers. We had a big fireplace and they'd be playing guitars and singing and talking—it was during the Vietnam War and all the discussions were about that. It was such an energetic, lively time, and my kids grew up in all of this. The Vista volunteers were their friends. They were from all over. New York, Royal Oak, Michigan, Colorado. There was one tall, tall guy with absolutely yellow hair, about the color of the top of that honey jar. They were really good to my two daughters, and they all played special games with them. At the same time, Academia was beginning. I think I missed out on a lot of that because a lot of it was in Spanish. You'd think that after all this time I'd be really great at Spanish, but I'm not a linguist. Unless you've got something wrong with you—then I can talk to you in Spanish. (Laughs) But you don't go into Zeller's store and ask someone how his cabeza is, or his estómago.

#### Support Staff

There were people in our house all the time. They would bring their sleeping bags and sleep in the torreón, with a big fire in the fireplace. Then for breakfast we had eggs and potatoes and toast and a big pot of coffee. You wanted to know what all this was like for me? I think I was the support staff. I kept the household going. I was raising two young daughters. If there were women here, and sometimes there were, they would pitch in the cooking and clean up. One batch would leave, and pretty soon another group of people

would be here. It was just very busy.

#### Brown Berets Pay a Visit

Remember the Brown Berets? These were the Hispanic counterpart of the Black Berets. They were very active in Albuquerque. They were doing a lot of marches and demonstrations. They got wind of Tomás and they came up here. I can't remember if they stayed overnight or if they slept in their cars, but it seems to me they were here for a while. They were very militant and very, very down on anything Anglo. Now here's this Anglo, me. I asked Tomás, "How do you reconcile the fact that you're married to an Anglo?"

"It's okay," he said; "you're different."

That helped for a while, but I think that eventually it bothered him, too. Anyway, the Brown Berets were here, and they had their discussions with Tomás and they got fed. It was in the evening. And all of a sudden there was just huge gunfire outside. They were target practicing in the arroyo. And it wasn't just a little pistol. It was big guns. I think heads must have popped up all over town. It just echoed against the hills. It scared our dogs half to death. It scared the kids. I think Tomás got them to simmer down. That was a scary thing; I did not like that. I was still very protective of my youngsters.

You have to know there was a lot of beer drinking and a lot of pot smoking. Academia had a bad name because of all the beer drinking and pot smoking. And the more beer you drink, the more strident you become. Tomás was not involved in the demonstrations and marches of the Brown Berets. He was involved in the philosophy. It was such an interesting time for me because there was so much creative energy! I remember a group from Texas coming in with music they were creating, guitar music and the lyrics that spoke of people's needs, and being second-class citizens. Those were things that Academia was concerned about. The artwork expressed that—the agony, the suffering Jesus, just the agony of people being poor, being mistreated. The prison-life. I felt helpless because I couldn't do anything, I couldn't do my old missionary stuff. I felt I wanted to do

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more. If I had all the money in the world I could help these people. In retrospect, maybe providing a place for these people to do these things was my role.

Later Academia got even bigger. They got a small printing press. Facundo Valdez purchased some land and a house on the Dixon plaza. Half that building, about three or four rooms, became the Academia, and the press was set up. Then they had all the meetings there. That sort of took the pressure off the Atencio household.

After we got divorced, Tomás got a PhD in sociology at University of New Mexico and taught Hispanic studies there. I went back to work. When I was director of the Embudo Treatment Center I remember interviewing one of his former students who was applying for a job as counselor. She found out that I used to be married to Tomás and she said she had loved his classes. He made her wake up and discover who she was, and what her culture was.

### Dixon, Past and Present

My first Sunday at Embudo Presbyterian Church, the church was packed. The service was all in Spanish. The hymns had familiar tunes, but they were all in Spanish. The only words I understood were the names of myself and my friend, Betty Wertenberger and Norma Hinz, as the pastor was introducing the two new nurses who had started working at the Embudo clinic. That's the only thing I understood. (Laughs) Now on our Spanish Sundays the Scriptures are read in Spanish and we have a song in Spanish and we say the Lord's Prayer in Spanish. The rest is in English. Then there would be a Spanish Sunday and an English Sunday. On Spanish Sunday the service was pretty much all in Spanish. Anglos didn't usually go to church on Spanish Sunday.

### The Post Office

I remember Tomás talking about the crowd waiting at the Post Office for the mail to be sorted. It used to be all Hispanic, but he said

it would eventually be all Anglo. I think he's pretty right. Now it's a mixture, but there's a lot of Anglos waiting.

It used to be a real cozy social time. You'd go down there at 8:30. Querino Atencio was the postmaster and while he was sorting the mail there'd be probably about ten or twelve people squeezed in there waiting for their mail to come out and gossiping about everything that was going on. That was the resolana, the warm place in the sun where you sit and discuss what is going on in the community. And now? I don't think it's quite as cozy a conversation at the post office. Then, all of a sudden Mr. Atencio would pull up the shutter and start selling stamps and taking packages and the mail was out.

### The General Store

Zeller's Store was just great. It had everything. Lydia ran the store while Doc worked at Los Alamos. He drove George and Gene up there to go to high school. The store had groceries, it had cooking ware, pots and heavy skillets and farm stuff. You could get a post-hole digger, crowbars, nails and screws in bulk (not the little packages in plastic), kerosene lamps, chimneys and mantels. It was so much fun to go in the back areas and prowl around just to see what they had.

### Telephones

When I first came to the hospital there were only three phones in Dixon: one at the hospital, one at the priest's house, and one at Zeller's Store. When I went to work in Mora, the telephone exchange closed down at eight o'clock at night so we couldn't phone out after that time. If you had an emergency, you'd have to send somebody down to the family that ran the exchange to get them to open up so you could call a doctor. When my father died at two o'clock in the morning up in North Dakota—we had been expecting it, they took the call from my mother and came up and rang the bell and knocked

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on the door and said “Death message for Betty Wertenberger. Death message for Betty Wertenberger.” That’s how I found out that my father had died. I was living in the village of Cleveland, about six miles from Mora. They waited for me and I went down to the exchange and talked to my mother.

Las Tres

*Is life better or worse than it was in those days?*

It depends upon how you define better. I think there’s better education, better knowledge about health, to some extent. Things are worse as far as drugs and gangs are concerned. There was always alcohol. Every time there was a fiesta, either in Dixon or Peñasco, we knew we would be busy in the emergency room at the Hospital. I remember after a wedding dance, back in the fifties, a guy came in covered with blood. The groom had slit this guy’s throat from ear to ear. But the stileto had missed all the vital things—didn’t get the blood vessels, didn’t get the windpipe.

Also, people smoked pot, but not as a recreational drug. And it was still legal. They would plant marijuana in with the corn. Then when they would be hoeing or irrigating their corn or their gardens, which was hard, back breaking work, they would take a pause for las tres, the three leaves, which was what they called marijuana. That gave them energy to continue working. That’s what Tomás has explained to me, how marijuana was used here. He mourned the fact that it became a recreational drug and everything else that happened with it.

When did things change? In the sixties, when the hippies came in. There was a big change after World War II. Before the war, people were really isolated in these little pockets in the mountains. The roads weren’t good. People didn’t get out. Just going to Española was a major thing. Going to Albuquerque was a real trip. When the guys were inducted into the Army they went all around the world. They came back with new ideas about the world. Also, Los Alamos was beginning to develop and people from here were getting

jobs up there. Gradually the roads started getting better. More people had cars. I think World War II made the big change.

The hippies started coming into Dixon while we were in Boulder. When we came back, in 1967, they were here. I remember this woman dancing down the street. She had on a brown velvet gown and she was barefoot. She was dancing down the street past Zeller’s and all the dogs were yip, yip, yip, all barking at her. And that made me think of the old nursery rhyme:

Hark, hark, the dogs do bark,  
the beggars are coming to town,  
some in rags, some in tags,  
and one in a velvet gown.

(Laughs) And I thought, oh my gosh, I wonder who this person is. And I never found out who it was. But the hippies made their mark in drugs, new kinds of drugs. But they also brought in wonderful energy. Everybody who stayed has contributed to the community in such beautiful ways. You know what I mean.

A Good Life

I have really enjoyed my life. It’s been a lot of fun. My home was good and solid. Coming here was what I was supposed to do. I’ve had small regrets, heartaches, but who doesn’t? In my advancing years— I’ll be seventy in a couple of weeks, I feel okay. I think I’m lucky to feel that way. And I hope I have ten or fifteen more years to live it up (laughs) in my own style. I find that my children are interested in the old stories. There are things in this house that were my grandparents, and they have stories attached to them. Life’s been good to me, God’s been good to me, and I appreciate it.

\*Note: La Academia de la Nueva Raza was an effort started in the 1960’s by a group of young Hispanics to preserve the oral history of

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the ancianos of northern New Mexico and to raise awareness of current social issues that affected them such as land, water, politics and government, education, religion, marriage, children and family. Young people spread out to many villages armed with tape recorders and cameras to record the stories of their elders. The resulting publications gave voice to this history and was also a platform for local writers, poets and artists.

La Academia was supported, in part, by a small grant from the Presbyterian Church to purchase equipment such as tape recorders, cameras and typewriters. -Betty Mascareñas