CHIMAYO WEAVING by Helen R. Lucero and Suzanne Baizerman
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Weaving is an ancient craft, highly valued and vital to human life. Cultures through time have imprinted their norms and values in cloth as a form of expression and for everyday utility. These fabrics of our lives have intricate and deep historic roots, and Chimayo weaving has endured through the centuries by becoming a mix of (Moorish) Middle Eastern, Spanish and (Navaho) Native American cultures.

In 1519 Hernan Cortes landed in Vera Cruz, Mexico, and began the conquest of the Aztec empire. Mexico was subsequently claimed as a Spanish colony. In 1540 Francisco Vasquez de Coronado led an expedition north into New Spain and also claimed that area for Spain. This included what is now the state of New Mexico. It was opened to further exploration and settlement, including weavers among the Spanish settlers, who settled in small colonies in the valleys. In 1610 Santa Fe became the first capital of New Mexico under a Spanish governor, and it has remained the oldest continuously occupied capital city in the U.S. American Indian trade routes provided sales opportunities for Hispanic weavers and missions (built by the Catholic church to convert heathen native peoples.) Supply caravans in 1631 included local hand woven Chimayo blankets and cloth. The authors cite a 1638 trade invoice listing a treadle loom and textiles exported to Mexico. Thus began the Hispanic weaving tradition in the southwestern United States. Influenced by nearly 800 years of invasion by Moors and Islamic Arabs, exclusive access to fine Spanish merino wool, and demand for Judeo-Christian religious garments and fabrics, the Hispanic weavers had a rich history of design and utility to draw on when making goods to market in the new world. Cloth was a vital staple and had an ongoing demand because otherwise it had to be brought from Europe or the Far East.

According to Wikipedia, Chimayo is a census designated place in Rio Arriba and Santa Fe counties, New Mexico. The name is derived from a Tewa Indian name for the hill of Tsi Mayoh, one of four hills sacred to the Pueblo. Elevation is over 6000 feet, where the climate is more temperate. Chimayo was a village in New Spain in 1598 where the Pueblo Indians had a pueblo structure and camp, cultivated food and medicines, and did weaving and pottery for community needs. There was easy access to established trade routes. Today the ruins of neighboring Quarai, NM, mark some of the Native American area ravaged by famine and epidemics inflicted on the Indians before they revolted. Spanish settlers imposed an imperialistic domination on Native Americans.

One form of Spanish control, the authors explain, was enslaving natives, including Spanish colonial weavers, to prohibit free trade. Caught in a “Repartimiento” system, they were compelled to pay tribute to their Spanish conquerors. Payments consisted of a valued garment which was woven for that purpose: a Manta, which was a white cotton rectangular cloth wrapped around the shoulders. Manta cloths were woven on upright fixed tension looms and on wooden treadle looms, whose design had come from Spain.

In 1680 the Pueblo Indians revolted, ending Spanish domination, according to Wikipedia. A 9/27/2020 New York Times article by Simon Romero states that the 1680 Pueblo uprising handed Spain one of its bloodiest defeats anywhere in its vast colonial empire. Romero refers to long simmering tension between Native Americans and Hispanics over Spain's conquest of New Mexico. Two statues of despotic conquistador Juan de Onate, a 16th century governor, were recently removed in Albuquerque due to their historical infamy. After the revolt captive Native American children became weavers. The 1600s were an era of misery for weavers, who made valued cloth but were themselves considered a lower class.

Spanish colonists thrived and the 1700s saw recolonization. Sheep ranches grew large and wool became plentiful due to commercial demand for their products in a growing population. Spanish weavers produced utilitarian products such as blankets which were woven from local wool colored by natural dyes, in two long strips, on narrow looms, then sewn together. The blankets could augment their farming income by weaving in the winter. The Ortega website says that along with other necessities, weavers even made mattresses.

The Navaho are skilled weavers who have woven forever. They create dense, water tight, originally striped, rectangular wool blankets of various sizes that have always been highly prized by the rest of the world. Chimayo weavers copied the Navaho designs but never achieved the level of weaving quality. Chimayo weaving was by necessity economic and opportunistic, while Navaho weaving is deeply cultural and integral to their lives.

Saltillo designs, intricate colorful stripes of various widths and geometric designs, influenced by the Moors and indigenous weaving, were popular. Named for Mexico City but actually woven in New Mexico, fine tapestry serapes were made by the most skilled weavers, from 1830. As weaving spread and changed, Saltillo designs became details in later weavings, less elegant, but with markets expanding to meet demand, production had to become faster and easier. Saltillo was an ornate Chimayo style featured in serapes and blankets.

New Mexico government officially encouraged weaving as a form of income in the 1800s. The Bazan brothers introduced cotton into traditionally all wool blankets, used new ikat dyes, tapestry patterns, and home workshops. Chimayo weavers embraced efficiency and innovation to increase production and sales. Serapes and frazadas became main trade items in all geographic directions. When in 1848 New Mexico was annexed by the United States, trade changed to fit the capitalism of the new country instead of the rigid Spanish structure.

Hispanos supplied blankets to the US government, which were given to Native Americans from 1848 to 1880, probably as part of Reservation agreements. These infamous gift blankets were exploited by unscrupulous traders and government agents, some blankets containing smallpox for genocide. The weaving trade relationships between Hispanics and Native Americans that had existed since the 1600s took an evil turn. Many tribes had to rely on these blankets for winter warmth and utility.

Looms for Hispanic weavers became easier to build and buy as milled lumber was shipped by railroad, also metal for reeds, new dye stuffs and some commercial yarns for weaving, in the 1850s and 1860s. Production was enhanced along with demand, so trade blossomed in the

weaving craft among Chimayo weavers. Crude wooden looms, hand made reeds, natural dyes and handspun wool were things of the past in this rail transportation era. Chimayo weavers had better tools, faster production methods and a growing demand.

Chimayo blankets evolved 1870-1900 due to available commercial yarns and easily manageable dyes. Dyeing wool or cloth is often dangerous due to poisons in the dye materials and can be hazardous or fatal, yet today. Using cotton warp, which is cheaper, easier to manage, and faster as a result, accelerated production, however, the "wool" blankets were not as warm or durable and certainly not water tight like Navaho's. Wool does not burn but cotton does. Chimayo weavers wove Vallero blankets, dazzling colorful pieces made in the mountains south of Taos, according to the authors. Bright colors sold well, and coincided with the Pueblo and Navaho making multi colored fine quality star design blankets that were highly desirable for tourists.

By the 1880s the Pendleton Company manufactured blankets to appeal to the Native American market. Hispanic weavers began making rag rugs, which had cotton warp and pieces of cloth as weft - inexpensive materials, and woven in plain weave with perhaps a tapestry design area - a very economical and useful product. Trading post sellers have long sought to keep prices elevated for Navaho blankets and rugs, to compensate weavers for the slow meticulous labor intensive creation of their products that begin with a sheep. Chimayo weavers focused on rapid production of easily affordable pieces, and branched into clothing and other items. Navaho weaving was very popular and Chimayo weaving evolved to fill gaps in Navaho products, so blanket and clothing designs followed the Navaho originals. Many Chimayo weavings were styled after and even sold as Navaho pieces, cheaply. They became Navaho knock-offs for a valid reason – to boost sales. However, weavers around the world tend to copy designs from others. It is part of the creative process, so Chimayo copies of Navaho designs were not unusual. The Navaho had been shown Middle Eastern designs by trading post sellers probably a generation ago, so their weaving had an expanded awareness of style and design. Mexican weavers also copied the Chimayo. Pendleton Home Collection catalogs today offer Chimayo designs.

Chimayo weavers typically wove smaller pieces on narrow looms standing on foot treadles, now known as Rio Grand looms. They could wind a long cotton warp onto the back beam and weave many small pieces to sell to tourists. Navaho weaving is incredibly labor intensive by comparison. They raise and shear their sheep, clean, comb and card the wool, spin it one or more times to make yarn, color the wool with natural dyes from flowers or vegetation they gathered and stored, then construct their looms from wood found or gathered, warp the loom for a single piece, tightly and systematically weave geometric and free style designs of their own creation, remove the piece from the loom and take it to market. This makes one weaving, which can be any size. Consequently pricing and quality of Navaho weaving reflect weavers' intense and lengthy labor, as the Navaho remain faithful to their traditional weaving technique.

When Navaho weavers switched from making blankets to rugs, due to encouragement from traders in trading posts, that gap was filled by Chimayo weavers. They made blankets loose and soft, from yarns not tightly spun for strength and durability and also less dense in the weave. These soft creations were much cheaper and filled gaps when Navaho blankets were unavailable. But customers complained about the shoddy weavings that could be easily pulled apart.

Chimayo weavers had to develop better quality products and in time they did improve, featuring bright colors and eye catching designs, which varied among individual weavers. Pieces were commissioned through trading posts, J.S. Candalario being one of the popular brokers for Chimayo weavers.

1870-1920 was a period of this change for Hispanic weavers responding to new commercial demand by trading posts which evolved into tourist and curio shops selling higher quality affordable by arriving tourists. New Mexico, like much of the southwest, is geographically unique and breathtaking, featuring landscapes never before seen by Eastern and Midwestern Americans. Trading posts offered food, interesting indigenous goods, guides, and atmosphere for adventure hungry travelers, and they profited accordingly. Gentrification brought curio shops and more luxurious woven goods for sale. Blankets, rugs, clothing and souvenirs acquired color, dazzle, intricate designs and romance for tourists. Chimayo blankets sold well. Also, adjacent Santa Fe had a huge Exposition in 1883, geared to tourists, and the coming Victorian era demanded curiosities for home decoration. Indigenous and exotic weaving became very fashionable.

National industrial growth had an unexpected consequence, however, for the toiling weavers. As whites had greater disposable income and could acquire luxuries, social awareness of wealth grew, and Hispanics and Native Americans fell to the bottom of the social ladder. Under this pretext they were economically vulnerable and lost much of their lands and grazing areas, which were seized by the government or swindled from lawful owners. So while industry flourished, weavers fell on hard times and turned to migratory work for survival. Large sheep ranches raised down breeds for meat instead of wool. Suitable wool for spinning and weaving became scarce.

An agricultural state lacking industry, New Mexico poverty drove weavers to sell primarily to tourists, but a philanthropic group of writers, anthropologists, artists, architects and cultural celebrities formed to develop more socially elevated Hispanic art and crafts in the southwestern area. Anglo artists had been attracted to northern New Mexico and resulting art colonies emerged in nearby Taos and neighboring Santa Fe, spearheading an arts and crafts revival movement championed by acclaimed writers of the era. The Pueblo Pottery Fund was created in 1922 on behalf of the rights of Native Americans, and involved Hispanos. The group sought to establish fine art from indigenous artists. They worked with local employers to further their cause, and became tourist attractions themselves as they sold their books and art work to travelers. In 1925 group leaders and their supporters established the Society for the Revival of Spanish Colonial Arts, and the following year their art and crafts were part of the new Fine Arts Museum located in Santa Fe. They stimulated tourism and developed a national stage for native arts and crafts in Santa Fe that flourishes today. Chimayo weavers, along with other local artists, finally climbed the social ladder in the southwest.

In 1929 the Great Depression took a toll on the national economy, including weavers, but government plans aided Hispanic weavers producing “modern Chimayo blankets”. Vocational schools, community programs and small production shops made blankets to sell to tourists. Hispanic weavers were unable to sell nationally in the finer arts market because their materials were commercial yarns and dyes, considered inferior quality. Their thrifty materials kept their

products at a lower aesthetic level. So they developed other household and apparel products: ties, vests, coats, jackets, home furnishings, etc.

By 1930 automobiles allowed easy access to Chimayo weavers' home shops and their individual businesses expanded. Formerly, horseback was the only mode of transportation to reach the outlying small weaving communities in northern New Mexico.

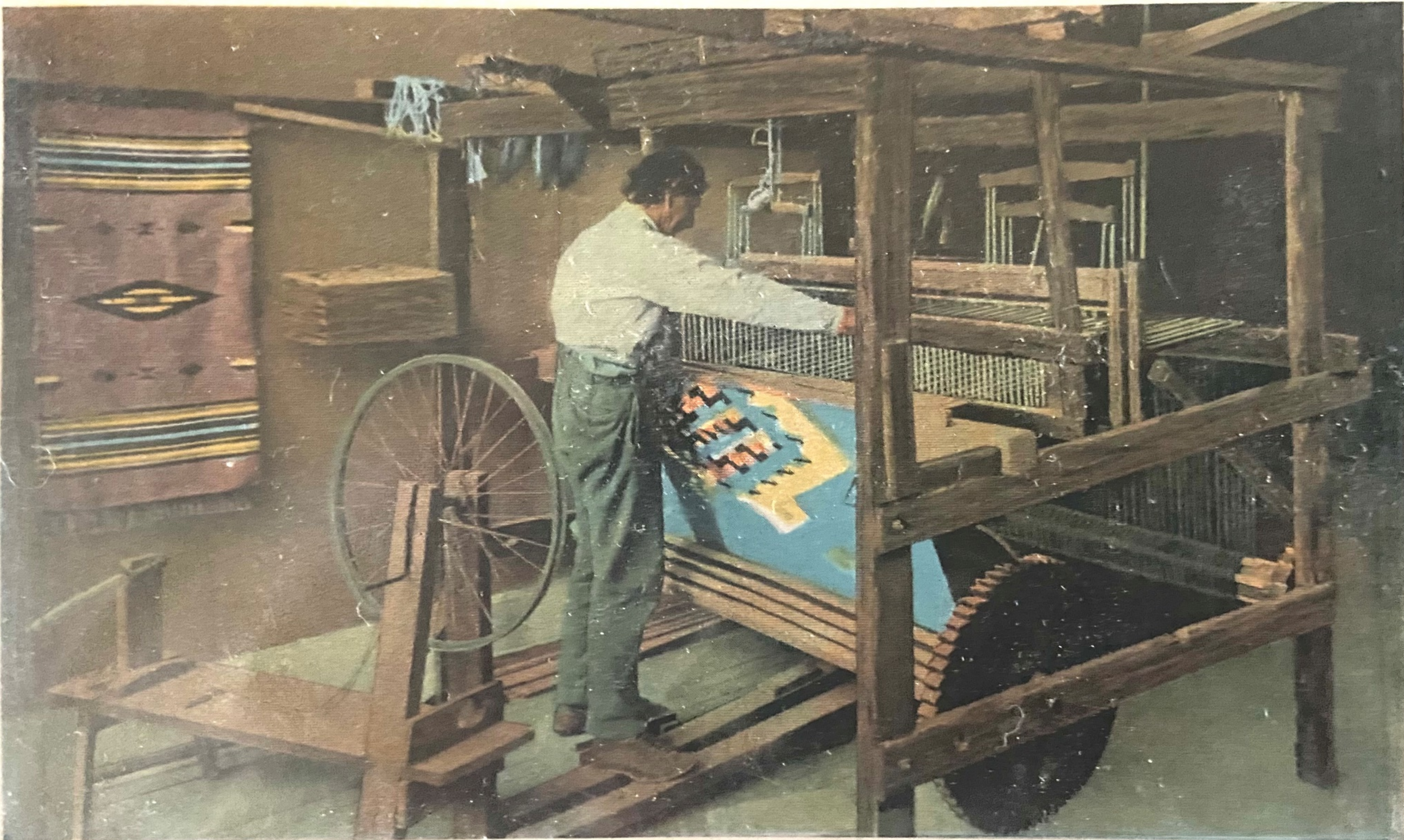
With World War II Hispanic weavers' numbers declined in New Mexico due to military enlistment and war casualties. Development of Los Alamos followed the war. Government subsidies became the new economic face in New Mexico, changing the population mix and culture. Weavers declined until the 50's and 60's when arts movements became interested in native goods again. Museums grew popular, and women in greater numbers became weavers of blankets to supply shops. Long standing weaving families of Hispanic origin grew more prominent and many have continued their businesses through generations, now advertising and selling via their web sites. Traditionally most weavers were affiliated with dealers who paid them by the piece, according to size and complexity of design. Today customers can place specific design and color orders online to order woven pieces from the weaving families.

Federal programs continued to aid weavers, providing means for young people to learn the craft. In 1965 the HELP program focused on teaching young weavers all the facets of weaving, important steps to become skilled in the craft.

For the rest of the 20th century acclaimed Chimayo weavers in New Mexico have received recognition and acclaim in newspapers, magazine articles and have exhibited in shows internationally. They continue to be advocates for Hispanic arts and culture, carrying forward tradition from their families and communities who struggled for hundreds of years to preserve their heritage and economic livelihood. Contemporary prominent Chimayo weaving families include the Ortega, Trujillo and Martinez, as well as individuals. Their weaving is stylized and is very beautiful. The book gives an in-depth account of their accomplishments and weaving lifestyles. The Ortega and Trujillo family weavers have websites in addition to shops in the Chimayo area. They continue to weave on looms they inherited, which have woven countless yards of fabric.

Finally, the authors explain the technology of this weaving structure in fine detail: historic loom construction, wool and yarn treatments, designs layouts, tapestry weaving instructions, and individual weaving styles. Chimayo weaving structures include plain weave and tapestry techniques.

This article is both a loose summary as book review and a commentary on the survival methods of a cohesive immigrant group of weavers. Heirs to a rich historic Spanish textile culture, they were able to geographically spread their trade and maintain it for centuries in a new world. Ancient cultures tended to live and market their trade goods nomadically on one continent. Although they initially capitalized on Indian markets in New Mexico, Chimayo weavers have endured tremendous social change and in the process built fine products that are luxuries today. Darwin was correct – the strong survive.



2264 A CHIMAYO WEAVER AT HIS LOOM

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The gray Chimayo blanket is from 1960s, very fine and tightly woven. White runner and Ortega vest date from the 1970s, and the thicker wool Ortega purple blanket is from 1980s. Aqua runner is also from Ortega, purchased online 2013. The large pieces show classic Chimayo design: stripes at both ends with a center tapestry motif, all wool. The black/white striped is a Mexican copy of Chimayo. Photos are courtesy of S. White, A. Boerup and T. Laffler. Thanks to Estela Klink for background chronology of weavings information.