

A Once and Future River

By William Poole

From time to time, Land&People tells the story of a conservation effort through the voices of participants and community members. The characters in this story come from the historic community of Agua Fria, on the outskirts of Santa Fe, where TPL recently helped enlarge the San Ysidro River Park as part of a larger effort to acquire open space along the Santa Fe River.

Maria Albina's Granddaughter



MELINDA ROMERO PIKE remembers when the new parkland was a verdant meadow along the Santa Fe River. Slender, vivacious, and elegant, with a coiffed cap of snowy hair, Pike does not willingly confess her age. It is enough to know that this memory comes from before the 1930s, when the one-room Agua Fria School stood

across the street from the meadow, and the teacher would take Pike and the other students to play in it.

“A big meadow was there,” she says, “and years ago when I was a child—like five or six—there was some gentleman who had herds of goats. And he had long white whiskers to here. And that man would come with his goats and he would graze them there, but they didn’t make a dent in it. It was just like you’d planted a lawn, but it was natural.”

Pike traces her family line in Agua Fria back to the early 17th century, and her adobe home down the street from the San Ysidro River Park is named Casa Maria Albina after her grandmother, who lived here. The village priest once boarded in this home. Her great-grandfather donated the land for the local church, built in 1835 and named for San Ysidro, the patron saint of farmers. And during the Depression what is now Pike’s living room served as a community store.

Even for a part of the country that measures its age in centuries, Agua Fria is venerable, thanks in large part to the Santa Fe River and flat fertile ground it once



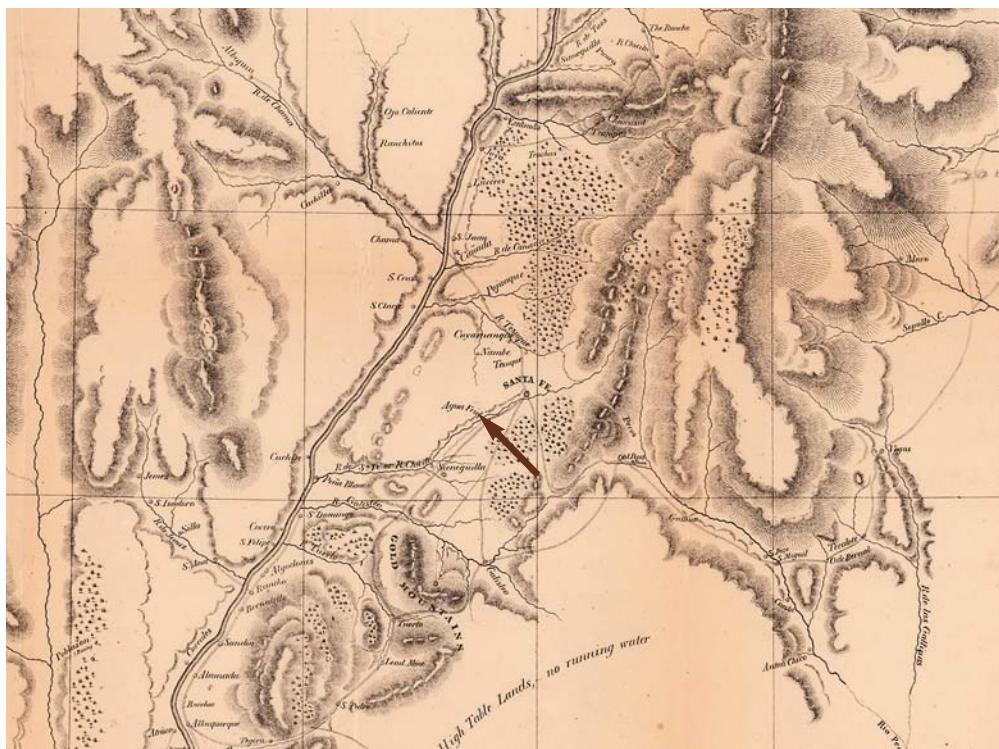
The Trust for Public Land Story Project

This *Land & People* story was developed in conjunction with TPL's Story Project, an effort to capture the power of land conservation through stories. Conservationists usually measure their accomplishments in acres of land protected and dollars raised for conservation. But these statistics cannot suggest the ways a conservation project may preserve the health, wholeness, and character of a community or enrich the lives of its residents—only stories can do that. Stories can best capture the importance of the land-and-people relationship and the many roles land plays in human life. The Story Project is part of TPL's broader attempt to understand and measure the benefits of our work and to inspire others to conserve land. Look for more Story Projects stories in future issues of *Land & People*.

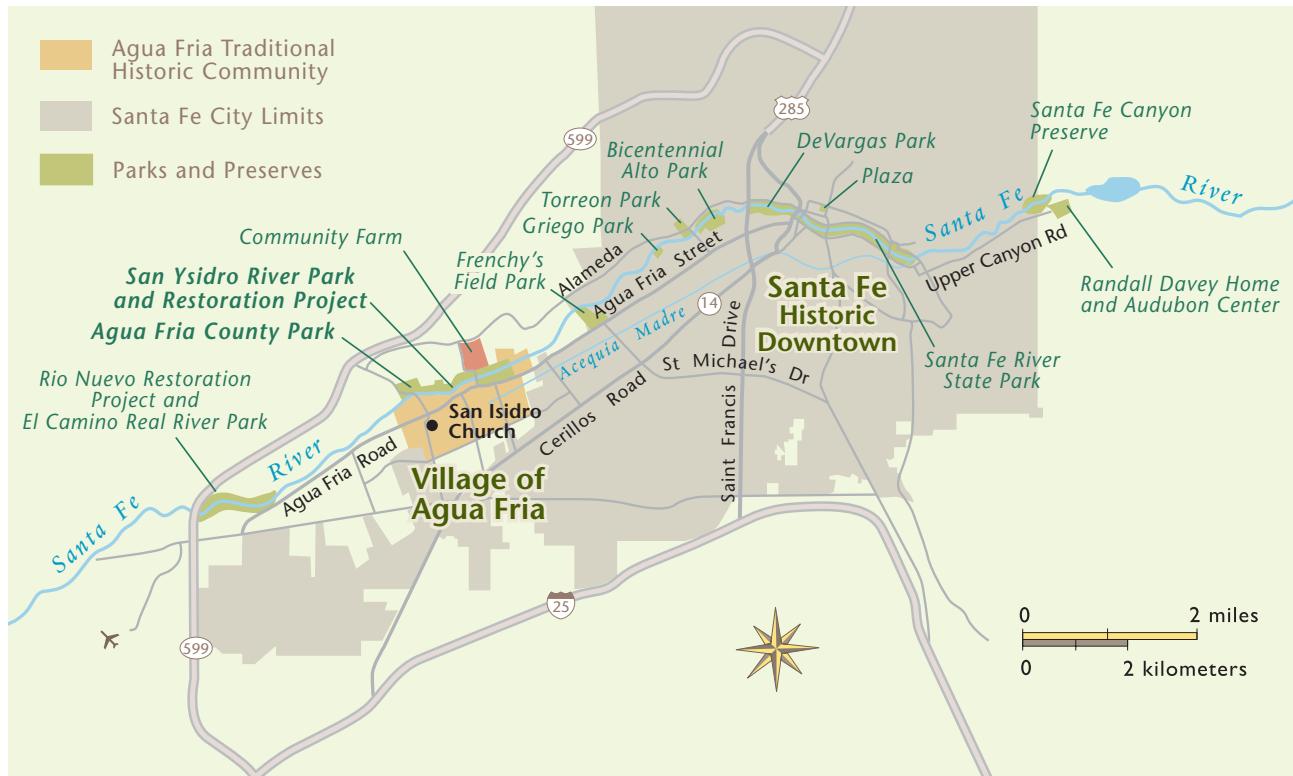
watered. (*Agua fria* means “cool water” in Spanish.) Pueblo ruins dating from before the conquistadores have been discovered along the river. And at least some current Hispanic residents trace their lineage back to officers in the Spanish army who were rewarded for their service with rich agricultural lands. The main road along the river, Agua Fria Street, is part of a prehistoric trail system that in colonial times became known El Camino Real. The route ran from Mexico to the colonial capital of Santa Fe, only five miles upriver from Agua Fria.

In her comfortable kitchen, Pike unrolls an undated map that shows the town at its productive peak. The map shows slivers of land as little as 50 or 100 feet wide where they intersect the river but stretching back from there up to several miles—giving everyone access to water as the land was divided within families over generations. Other water for planting came from *acequias*, irrigation ditches off the river, and from springs and shallow wells.

Map details suggest the fecundity of Agua Fria in the decades before World War II. Plots of land are labeled as



Aqua Fria was already a long-established community when Brigadier General S. W. Kearny commissioned this map of New Mexico territory in 1846. Detail shown. Full map available in the TPL Collections at www.DiscoveryEditions.com/tpl. Previous page: The dry bed of the Santa Fe River between Santa Fe and Agua Fria.

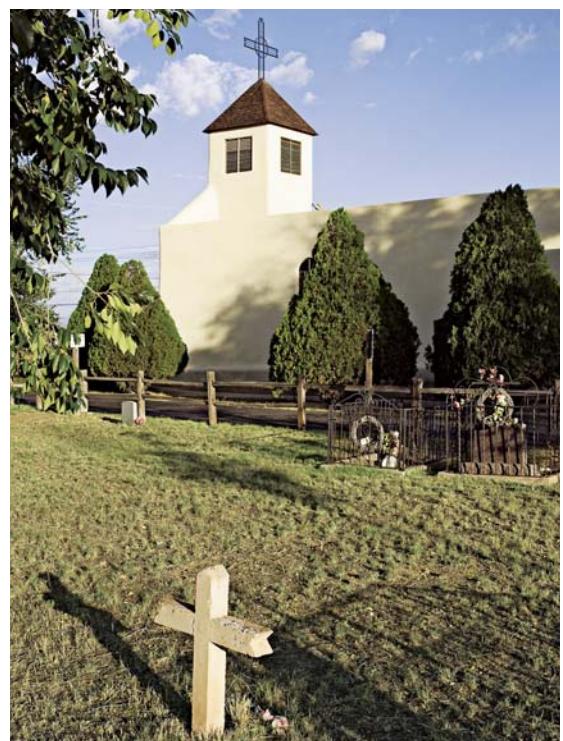


alfalfa, row crops, corn, orchard, and plowed ground. Along the meandering stream ran a *bosque*—a riverside forest of cottonwoods and willows, Pike recalls. “On the high side of the bank my brother would lasso the tree branch and we would swing, and down below we would climb the trees.”

Then, pretty much overnight, Agua Fria all but dried up. The cause of this calamity was the damming of the river to slake the thirst of a growing Santa Fe. Instead of running in all but the driest weeks of summer, in most years the river ran only in the wettest winter weeks. With the water gone, gravel miners quarried the river’s banks to make concrete for the growing city. The water table dropped so that wells had to be dug deeper and deeper. The *bosque* and other vegetation dried up, and without the vegetation to slow it, the river, when it did flow, ran like an express train, straightening the channel, undercutting the banks.

“There was no river left,” Pike says. “It was the memory of a river.”

Today there is very little agriculture in Agua Fria. Horses graze in dusty pastures, and houses look out on



San Isidro Church was built in 1835 on land donated by Melinda Romero Pike’s great-grandfather.

WILLIAM POOLE



There has been very little agriculture in Aqua Fria since the Santa Fe River was dammed in the 1940s to supply water for a growing Santa Fe.

weedy fields or drooping barbed-wire fences. Along Agua Fria Street, many homes are compact and modestly prosperous. Farther back from the road, house trailers march along old family plots where crops were once planted and *acequias* once ran. There is no store, and the closest thing to a community center is the elementary school. It is a place that some might consider "underutilized," a series of cul-de-sac subdivisions waiting to happen—an option most residents definitely do not embrace.

As for the former meadow across from where the old school had stood, it has dried to gravelly desert,

enlivened by the shrubby yellow bloom of rabbitbrush and purple asters. Despite this, the land's protection as part of a larger effort to preserve open space, build new parks, and create a trail system along the river has been widely celebrated in Agua Fria and greater Santa Fe. Some folks simply welcome the recreational values the project would bring. But for Melinda Romero Pike and others it symbolizes the possible recovery of a community from the insults that began with the damming, the possible revival of a river nearly given up for dead, and the chance to make the river a focus for community life once again.

The Social Worker



WILLIAM POOLE

"**L**IKE EVERYONE ELSE, I wasn't aware that it was a river at all," confesses Nichoe Lichen, volunteer director of the El Camino Real River Connection (CRRC), an alliance of nonprofits and government agencies working to protect open space and create trails along the river. A social worker by profession, Lichen exudes the sincerity and warmth you would expect from a woman who helps connect babies with adoptive parents. She also possesses a hair-trigger sense of humor and erupts into genial laughter when reminded of her own unlikely evolution, in only a few years, from someone who does not know a river exists to one of its major champions.

This story line begins in 2000, when Lichen and her friend Ann Lacy began raising funds for a successful effort to conserve a highly visible property at the entrance to Santa Fe. With funds left over from that project, they began to ask residents on the poorer south side of Santa Fe, including Agua Fria, what land they would like to see conserved. They did this, she says, because she is a social worker by nature, not just by profession.

"We knew that the kids didn't have parks or anything," Lichen says. "And we told residents that if they could recommend a place to us, we could get something going and give it as a gift to that side of town. They said, 'Well, we'd really like for you to save the river, and by the way, did you know that this was also the route of the Camino Real?'"

Thus began the latest of several efforts over the last decade to think about the Santa Fe River's relationship to its fast-developing region, and about how to maximize its potential for recreation, environmental restoration, historical interpretation, and community-building. Early in the process, The Trust for Public Land's Santa Fe office hired an intern named Karyn Stockdale to talk to landowners along the river and look at how parcels might be protected. Today Stockdale—whose physical trademark is her thick shock of kinky, sand-colored hair—is a TPL project manager and has completed three projects in support of the park-and-trail program. "There's going to be a myth about her along the river some day," Lichen says, "that wild-haired woman who saved the river."

Another nonprofit partner in the project is the Santa Fe Watershed Association, which has focused on



Top: Nichoe Lichen, of the El Camino Real River Connection. Above: TPL project manager Karyn Stockdale.



WILLIAM POOLE

Located midway between Agua Fria and downtown Santa Fe, Frenchy's Field Park will be part of a network of protected lands along the Santa Fe River.

community organizing and on planting vegetation and restoring the river's banks after years of erosion and mining. The association took the lead in meeting with Agua Fria residents.

Key to the project's success so far, Lichen says, is its deep commitment to community participation. "We weren't saying, we have a plan or this is what we're

going to do. Nothing happened in that village that wasn't led and determined by the village. In the past outsiders have come in and said, 'Boy, have we got a plan for you.' We spent a lot of time meeting with the community and letting them know that nothing was going to happen unless they took the lead on it."

The Community Activists

RAMON ROMERO LEFT AGUA FRIA as a young man in 1970 and didn't return for almost 15 years. He wanted to repair heavy machinery in Montana, until his father told him, "I don't know what you're doing the way in the heck over there, but you got all this property here, and if you don't come back I'm going to sell it."

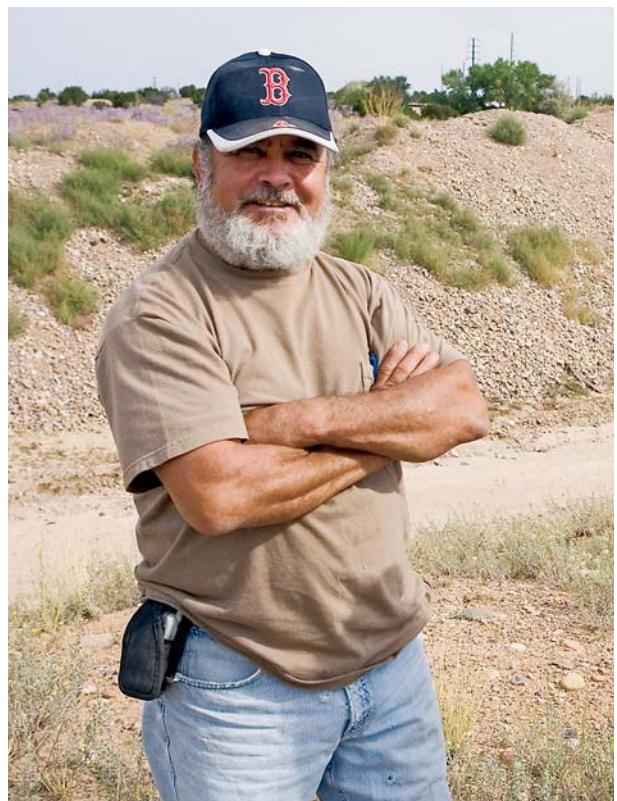
Today Romero, a tough, bearded, sparkplug of a man with warm brown eyes and a ready smile, fixes diesel trucks in a cavernous and spotless shop behind his mother's house on Agua Fria Street. (On the shop's walls hang antique tools, cowboy gear, and other reminders of Agua Fria's past.) As chair of the Agua Fria Village Association, he meditates a lot on the community's past glories, the decline that began when the river was shut off in the 1940s, and a future he believes could be better.

The big question for almost anyone who cares about Agua Fria is whether it can resist the rising tide of development from Santa Fe. To many residents, this feels like the final assault that could obliterate in only a few decades a community that took four centuries to build.

A few years back Agua Fria secured an official state designation as a Traditional Historic Community, which prevents its lands from being annexed by the city without a vote of residents. In addition, the narrow slivers of family land make it hard for developers to assemble large parcels for a shopping mall or housing development. But despite these impediments, development is eating away at the edges of town. Romero, who built his own home on his family's strip of land in the 1980s, is going to move soon because a big-box home-improvement store is arriving next door. As one family leaves, this puts pressure on the family next door to sell, and pretty soon a developer is able to put a parcel together, and the nature of the place begins to change.

To Romero and others, the conservation work along the river could create a communal focus, prevent development of the conserved parcels, and empower residents to tackle other civic tasks, such as forging a united response to development threats.

"Our goal would be to preserve traditional density, ruralness, and open space and keep the young people in the village, where the properties have been passed



WILLIAM POOLE

Ramon Romero, chair of the Agua Fria Village Association.

down from generation to generation the last four hundred years, which is the custom and the tradition," Romero says. "This land along the river is all going to be open space and is going to get renovated and fixed up. Once people can enjoy the river as they used to in the past, it might encourage them to stay."

But not everyone in Agua Fria is as optimistic. Some residents believe the tide of change, while undesirable, is inevitable. Among them is Tamara Lichtenstein, who with her husband, artist Michael Bergt, and their eight-year-old daughter, Siena, lives in a cozy, art-filled home just down the road from Ramon Romero. When they moved there in 1991, the boarded-up fixer-upper was what they could afford in Santa Fe.

Almost before renovations were complete, Lichtenstein had thrown herself into community affairs, and for more than a decade she has been fighting with the county and city to give the community control over its own growth. Some battles have been won: in part because



WILLIAM POOLE

Community activist Tamara Lichtenstein with her daughter, Siena.

of her work, Agua Fria Street remains a narrow, local street where it runs through the village. (One plan would have seen it widened.) And stop signs have been installed to calm traffic and protect children.

But on the big battle to keep land use traditional, she is more pessimistic. "For a long time, developers looked

at those long narrow strips and realized that if they want to do things their way they're going to have to convince a large number of people to put their pieces together," she says. "But that's what they started doing. And they're not just from Santa Fe, they're from out of state, or international. The high-density development that's coming in, that's money from all over. And it's highly unlikely that most people who will be living there are from here."

In this scenario, the importance of the river conservation work has to do with children—in particular, the children who will live in those densely packed new neighborhoods, Lichtenstein says.

"Because there are going to be kids growing up here, going to overcrowded schools—living in the trailers and the high-density developments. If they didn't have this land along the river, what else would they have? If you think about some of the most damaged and challenged neighborhoods TPL has dealt with in L.A., that's kind of like what you're going to be seeing here down the road. But in this instance you're able to be proactive instead of coming along later and saying, 'Gosh, I wish there was something we could do for these kids but there's no open space left.'"

The 91-year-old Weightlifter



ACROSS THE DRY RIVERBED from the new piece of San Ysidro River Park, on a warm September afternoon, Roy Stephenson and Karyn Stockdale hunt for ripe pears in his small family orchard. "The ones on the tree are probably too hard, and a lot of the ones on the ground are mushy, but if you find a firm one, they are delicious," he says, holding up a sample for Stockdale's inspection.

Stephenson's family owned the land that will become the park addition, but their dedication to the project transcends that transaction. Over the last six decades they have deeply inhabited this land and offered it up for the common good. Their hillside orchard of apple, pear, and cherry trees is a mouth-watering landmark in Agua Fria. Rising high and green above a sere landscape, it is easily visible across the river from Agua Fria Street, and every summer by tradition families pick ripe cherries for free.

Roy's father, John Stephenson, is a wiry man of 91 and the American record holder in his weight class in Olympic-style weightlifting for men over 75. John spent his career working for the U.S. Forest Service and moved out from Santa Fe in the late 1940s, building a modest home in the orchard. Despite being relative newcomers to Agua Fria—they arrived centuries later than most neighboring families—the Stephensons have felt accepted here, and their open-handed good nature hasn't hurt.

Between the orchard and the river are about 4 acres of plowed ground, irrigated from a deep well. Since the mid-1980s this land has been known as the Community Farm, all its produce going to residents in need, homeless shelters, food banks, and other charities. A local nonprofit administers the farm, and volunteers come from across the region—across the country, in fact—to work it.

For this and other volunteer work, John Stephenson was honored as one of the first President Bush's "thousand points of light." His son, Roy—sand-haired and affable—works for the New Mexico Public Regulation Commission and serves on the board of the Santa Fe Watershed Association. Both men were aware of the conservation effort along the river and assumed that sooner or later they would sell some of their land for the park-and-trail system.

Some of the money they received—far less than the land would have brought for development—will be plowed into the Community Farm, which they envision will someday be an important stop for walkers and cyclists along the river trail.

"I view what could be here as a kind of continuum," Roy says. "There'll be the streetscape along Agua Fria Street, and the park and the river—we might get some cottonwoods back. We've talked about shaping an oxbow in the river and doing some planting. That would transition into a brush corridor for wildlife, and then you'd have the farm. People could come out from Santa Fe on bicycles. People could have their own little plot at the farm and contribute 10 to 20 percent of what's grown to the community."

But could the river ever come back? Stephenson is adamant that it can. If new plantings can slow down



John Stephenson will plow some of the money he received for the new parkland back into Community Farm. Produce from the farm goes to food banks and residents in need.

the water in winter so more of it is absorbed, if more water can percolate down through protected landscapes instead of rushing off parking lots and roofs, if water can be captured and channeled to the river—then the damage done over the last five decades can be ameliorated, if not completely reversed. "The goal of the Santa Fe Watershed Association is to have water in the river. That's the mission statement," Stephenson says.



WILLIAM POOLE

John Stephenson's son, Roy, serves on the board of the Santa Fe Watershed Association, a partner in the effort to create parks and trails along the river.



KIM KURIAN

The River Blessing



IN THE WINTER OF 2005, nature made its own valiant attempt to revive the Santa Fe River. Rain and snow came early and often, and the river ran through May. "The most beautiful sight your eyes could behold after seeing that barren, dry riverbed," recalls Melinda Romero Pike.



KIM KURIAN

Agua Fria neighbors process to the river on San Ysidro Day.

With the river doing its part, Karyn Stockdale and Nichoe Lichen sat down with folks from the County's Open Space Program and the Watershed Association to plan a special dedication of the new river park addition. For generations before the water dried up, farmers would conduct river blessings, giving it their respect and recognizing its bounty. Following that tradition, on May 15, 2005—San Ysidro's feast day—a small parade left the Agua Fria church bearing the saint's image and walked to the riverfront park.

Nichoe Lichen would later call it: "My favorite experience in Santa Fe in 30 years." Deacon Mike Siegle gave the blessing. Flowers were tossed into the current. Ramon Romero spoke, as did Roy Stephenson, Melinda Romero Pike, Karyn Stockdale, State Senator Nancy Rodriguez, and County Commissioner Virginia Vigil. Afterward, neighbors who had not seen one another in years sat around and talked and ate tamales—drawn together by a river that had been the heart of their community for a dozen generations and was now being rediscovered, preserved for some as yet undetermined but vital future.

PROJECT SNAPSHOT

TPL Office: New Mexico State Office, Santa Fe

Project goals: To create parks and trails along the Santa Fe River, roughly following the route of the old Camino Real. To provide recreation and a focus for community unity while interpreting the region's Native American, Hispanic, and postcolonial history.

Project partners: Agua Fria Village Association, Santa Fe County, City of Santa Fe, New Mexico State Land Office, Santa Fe Watershed Association, El Camino Real River Connection (CRRC)

Funding and support: Key funding from voter-approved county conservation finance measures in 1998 and 2000, which together generated approximately \$20 million. Additional support from the voter-approved sales tax increase passed in 2002, which helps generate planning, design, and maintenance funding for Santa Fe River projects. Other important support since 2002 has come from the New Mexico state legislature through direct appropriations and from TPL donors.

For more information: Karyn Stockdale at (505) 988-5922 or karyn.stockdale@tpl.org.

At the event, Melinda Romero Pike read in Spanish a poem entitled “Nocturno” (“Night”) by the Argentine poet Conrado Nalé Roxlo (1898-1971). Months later, in her kitchen at Casa Maria Albina, she consents to translate for a visitor, her voice touched with both longing and memory:

*The bosque sleeps and dreams;
the river does not sleep, it sings.
In between the green shadows
the rapid water flows,
leaving on the dark edges
bundles of white foam.
With eyes filled with stars,
in the bottom of a boat
I go with great emotion
by the music of the water.
And I take the river in my lips.
And I take the bosque in my soul.*

William Poole is the editor of Land&People magazine.

Accomplishments to date: TPL has assisted Santa Fe County in acquiring open space, parkland, and trail easements over approximately 66 acres of the Santa Fe River corridor in 3 different locations. On the western boundary of the village of Agua Fria, the county in 2002 purchased a conservation and trails easement over about 46 acres of New Mexico State Land Office property, which allows for restoration projects within the river corridor and connects the river trail to the recreation center, ballpark, and open space lands near Highway 599. In 2005, TPL helped the county expand the San Ysidro River Park through the acquisition of about 9 acres of river land at the Community Farm and acquired about 11 acres of river land on the eastern boundary of the village. These river acquisitions leverage other public and protected lands and continue the linking of parks, trails, and open space along the Santa Fe River and sites commemorating the El Camino Real Trail.



Melinda Romero Pike read the poem “Nocturno” at the river blessing.