

The Pueblo of Acoma

Clarence Pullen

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PERHAPS the most interesting people among the aborigines of the American continent are the Pueblo (town) Indians of New Mexico and Arizona, who have an ethnological affinity, if not a direct kinship, with the succession of different migratory peoples, beginning with the Toltecs and ending with the Aztecs, who, between the seventh and the twelfth centuries, passed southward from the unknown region, Aztlan, to colonize the Valley of Mexico and its environing vales and plains. The substantial and permanent character of the houses composing the pueblos of these tribes, each tiny town being an independent community; the primitive civilization that still prevails among their inhabitants, unchanged in centuries; the adherence of the people to pastoral, horticultural, and agricultural pursuits; their gentleness, hospitality, industry, and thrift; their bravery in defence of home and liberty; their chastity; and the isolation that each existing pueblo has maintained in the midst of surrounding tribes and the settlements of the whites — are all noteworthy characteristics; and in their social relations within each city these Indians afford as nearly as has ever been attained an example of rational and successful communism.

Among the nineteen communities of these Indians in New Mexico, the pueblo of Acoma, in Valencia County, ranks with Zuni in its attractiveness to the ethnologist and the archaeologist, and it is unique in location, being aptly termed "a city in the sky." The surrounding country is of the most rugged, broken, and varied character, consisting of table-lands cut irregularly by precipitous canons and separated by mountain ranges. A few miles to the west of Acoma, between that pueblo and Zuni, the lava flood poured forth in prehistoric times from a volcano now long extinct, overspreading the plain, cracked, as it cooled and hardened, into a long heap of enormous jagged black rocks, called by the Mexicans malpais — a petrified torrent two miles in width and many miles in length, presenting, save for one narrow gap, through which winds a stony, difficult trail, an impassable barrier to the passage of man or beast. East of this lava bed a large canon with precipitous sides expands into a valley four miles wide and ten miles long, opening to the northeast. From the surface of this extensive basin rise great detached sandstone buttes in various forms of pinnacles — pyramids, pillars, and obelisks — some of which are several hundred feet high, the whole presenting a strange and grotesque spectacle, like a city of wonder-land. On the level barren summit of an enormous isolated sandstone rock, or mesa, that rises steep and high from the plain, is situated the pueblo of Acoma, at an elevation of 7500 feet above the sea-level.

The first written account of this pueblo is by Castaneda, the historian of Coronado's military expedition into New Mexico in the year 1541, who relates that Captain Hernando de Alvarado, with a party of twenty men, while exploring the country to the eastward of Zuni, arrived at the village of Acoma — called by the natives A-go, and by the Spaniards Acuco — "a very strong place, built upon a rock very high, and on three sides perpendicular. The inhabitants are great brigands, much dreaded by all the provinces." The pueblo could muster two hundred warriors, and from their audacious and martial spirit and the security of their impregnable stronghold, the Acomas were able to defy the other pueblos, as well as their hereditary enemies the Navajos. Castaneda's description of the village applies almost precisely to its appearance to-day. He states that the sides of the rock on which it stood were so precipitous that the ascent of it by human beings was impossible except at one place, where a stairway led from the plain up to the village. This stairway was of sufficient width for the first two hundred steps, but after ascending these, there were encountered one hundred steps far more difficult, and then a perpendicular ascent of twelve feet remained, which could only be climbed by the use of holes made in the face of the rock, which compelled the climber to make use of both hands and feet.

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On the summit were heaped huge stones, which the defenders, without exposing themselves, could roll down on any assailants of their stronghold, so that no army, whatever its strength might be, could force a passage within the town. Upon the flat top of the bluff was stored a large quantity of corn, and cisterns sunk in the solid rock supplied the inhabitants with water. On the approach of the Spaniards, the Indians came down boldly into the plain, and tracing lines upon the ground, haughtily forbade them to pass over them; but when they saw the undaunted Alvarado prepare his company to attack them, they suddenly changed their tone, sued for peace, and in token of amity presented the Spaniards with a great quantity of poultry, together with bread, deer-skins, pine nuts, seeds, flour, and corn.

In the year 1598, when New Mexico first was colonized by the Spaniards under Juan de Onate, the Acomas attacked the Maestro de Campo, Juan de Zaldiver, and fifteen of his men, who were visiting their village, and killed the commander and all of his party except one officer and four men. These five Spaniards, being pressed by the Indians, leaped boldly down the face of the cliff. Strange to say, but one of the five was killed, the remainder reaching the bottom without fatal injury. Two months later, a force of the Spaniards, under command of Vicente de Zaldivar, stormed the rock and town of Acoma, and its inhabitants afterward consented that Franciscan missionaries should make their home among them, the tribe eventually being converted to a nominal Christianity.

In the year 1680 the people of Acoma joined in the successful insurrection of the New-Mexican Pueblo Indians against their Spanish oppressors, and thereafter enjoyed a period of independence and paganism until 1692, when Governor Don Diego de Vargas Zapata Lujan, in his reconquest of the province of New Mexico, reached Acoma, and drew up his force before the rock. After some negotiations the natives surrendered, and De Vargas and the pueblo chief, Mateo, publicly embraced each other, after which a large cross was erected, and the ceremony of absolution and a general baptism took place. Since the beginning of the seventeenth century this pueblo has been, professedly at least, an orthodox Catholic community.

Acoma is situated about eighteen miles in a southeasterly direction from McCarthy Station on the Atlantic and Pacific Railway, midway between Albuquerque and Fort Wingate. Its people, like those of Moqui and Zuni, have retained to a great extent their ancient customs. The walls of light-tinted sandstone, "nearly everywhere vertical or overhanging," of the bluff or "penol" on which the town stands rise from two hundred and fifty to three hundred feet above the plain. Against their bases the sand has blown in great drifts, extending far up into the recesses and fissures of the cliffs. Until within recent years, as in the days of its discovery by Alvarado, only one path gave access to the top. It is a toilsome and dangerous route, winding along the edge of frightful chasms, leading up through fissures, and passing over crags. In places steps have been hewn, and up the face of the naked rock holes have been cut to give a foothold to climbers, and the constant use of these holes by the Indians through centuries has worn them to the exact shape of the toe of a moccasin. Up this steep path an Acoma Indian with a live sheep on his shoulders will run rapidly without helping his ascent in any way by the use of his hands.

The Acomas use this foot-path yet, but they have in recent years made on the opposite side a horse trail, very steep and difficult, which winds up over immense sand drifts and steep rocky ledges to the top of the rock. Up this bridle-path animals that are accustomed to mountain climbing can go in single file. The surface of the top of the mesa, comprising about ten acres, is naturally a rough naked space destitute of vegetation. The town is constructed after the usual style of the pueblos of New Mexico, and consists of from sixty to seventy houses two or three stories high, built of adobe or of rubble-stone, rising terrace-shaped, with flat roofs. There are no windows in the first story, or doors, except in the roof, which is reached by means of ladders. Within the houses are several estufas, or apartments used as council-chambers and for the secret practice of the Acomas' ancient religious rites, including the maintenance of the sacred fire in honor of their ancient gods. The town has about eight hundred inhabitants, and is divided by three parallel streets.

The people, in early days so warlike and arrogant, are now peaceable, and maintain themselves from their flocks and herds and the tillage of their agricultural lands, which lie from fourteen to sixteen miles from the pueblo, on the line of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, where they have their summer villages of Aconista and Pueblito.

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Here they raise corn, beans, pumpkins, and melons, and have productive orchards of peaches and apricots. Upon the cliff there are no springs, but there is a large water-tank about one hundred and fifty feet long, twenty feet broad, and five feet deep. This tank is filled with snow in the winter, and during the summer rain-water is collected in it, furnishing the water required by the inhabitants. The Acomas do all their cooking in earthen vessels of their own manufacture. Their pottery is of fine quality and very handsome, being readily distinguishable among the coarser work of some of the other pueblos. Furniture is unknown among them, and the people sleep on sheepskins spread on the floor. Their houses are neat and orderly, some of them being whitewashed without and within. The roofs in the season are covered with drying peaches and apricots, and against the walls hang festoons of bright red peppers and strings of pumpkins and muskmelons, cut into ropes and twisted into bunches, which are dried for winter use. The horses, asses, cattle, sheep, and goats of the pueblo are herded in the great basin below the village, which is an excellent stock range. The soil is of a nature to produce fine crops, but owing to the absence of watercourses it cannot be utilized for agriculture except through the construction of a reservoir system for the retention of the summer rains and floods, a work that may some day be undertaken, and which will probably be attended by successful results.

About a mile from Acoma is La Mesa Encantada (the Enchanted Hill), with perpendicular walls rising four hundred feet high from the plain. There is a weird tradition of this lofty cliff related by Mr. James W. Steele, who states that on this mesa was anciently the home of the people of Acoma. One day in harvest-time the whole population of the town — men, women, and children — with the exception of three ailing women, were in the valley below, working together, according to their custom on such occasions. A cloudburst, as the sudden rain floods of the country are called, occurred up the valley, and a great wave swept down, undermining the sand upon which rested the narrow staircase of notched rock by which alone the top of the mesa could be reached. When the people returned, they found that where the stairs had been, the whole side of the mesa had fallen in a heap in the valley below, leaving the summit absolutely inaccessible. The three women could be seen above, wandering around the edges, waving their arms, and shouting, but no help could reach them. The skeletons of these women lie somewhere on the summit, where still are the walls of the old city; but nobody has ascended the Mesa Encantada since the day of the disastrous flood.

Like the people of all the other New Mexican Pueblo tribes, the Acomas have their annual festivals, the origin of which is lost in the mystery of the prehistoric ages. The Catholic priests put all the Christian veneering possible over the essential heathenism of the ceremonials, and under their influence these celebrations occur usually on or near some saint's day. Conspicuous among these jubiliations is the harvest festival, when, with games and dances, the people rejoice over the ripening of the fruits of the earth. After the performance of secret rites within the estufas, to which ceremonies no one not a member of the tribe is admitted, the maskers, musicians, and others, all decorated in paint, ribbons, and brass ornaments, stream forth into the open space before the village, where, with the peculiar stamping step attending all Indian performances of the kind, are continued the processions and dances, to the music of rude fifes, drums, and gong-beating. In some of their dances the performers are attired in complete suits of buckskin, adorned with fringes, buttons, beads, feathers, and ribbons, completely covering the face and head, surmounted with horns, and having only small slits for sight and breathing.

The Pueblos, a provident folk who believe in intrenching themselves with all the supernatural powers, do not neglect on these occasions to visit the church to pay due obeisance to the Christian God and lesser divinities. The church, a fine old structure of adobe, was rebuilt in 1702, after it had been dismantled in the Indian revolt of 1680. It is a massive edifice one hundred and fifty feet long, forty feet wide, and forty feet high, with walls seven feet thick, standing, fronted by an extensive and ancient burial-ground, on the southern brink of the mesa. The sand for this cemetery was brought up from the foot of the bluff, and placed in a depression at this point — an operation which, according to priestly tradition, occupied forty years. The huge buttresses, one at each front corner of the church, are capped above the roof by rude belfries, in which swing two bells, which Indian tradition asserts to be the gift of the Queen of Spain at some period in the eighteenth century. One of these bells bears the inscription, "San Pedro, A.D. 1710." It is a wonder how these heavy bells, and the great pine beams, forty feet long, and of proportionate thickness, that cross the body of the church, were ever brought to the top of the mesa.

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Adjoining the church are the ruins of the old Franciscan mission of San Estevan de Acoma, established, says the eminent archaeologist and historian Professor Ad. H. Baudelier [sic], by Fray Juan Ramirez not long after the year 1628, he naming the place after St. Sebastian on account of its rocky sides and the large number of pebbles accumulated on and about it. Fray Ramirez returned to Mexico, and died there in 1664. His successor was Fray Lucas Maldonado, from Tribujona, Mexico, also a Franciscan. In fact, up to the uprising of the Indians of New Mexico under Pope and Catite in 1680, the Franciscan Order controlled all the missions among the Pueblos. On August 10, 1680, twenty-one Franciscan friars were murdered in various parts of New Mexico, and among them Fray Maldonado, of Acoma. After the reconquest of the province, twelve years later, by the Spaniards under Diego de Vargas, there were for several years occasional disturbances and bloodshed. But by the beginning of the eighteenth century the province had become tranquillized, and the Pueblo Indians and the Spaniards had adjusted their requirements so as to get along together without a great amount of friction.

It is a strange and picturesque sight when within the thick walls of the old church, dimly lighted by deep windows like portholes, in which sheets of mica, or yeso (transparent gypsum), serve for glass, the Indians, in the same fashion of dress which their ancestors wore when they built fires to the sun in ancient days — some wrapped in Navajo blankets, with broad black and white stripes, and great red diamond figures in the centre — pass to and from the altar, with its bright but impressive decorations. The church interior is decorated with two valuable pictures, the "Virgin and Child," and the "St. Joseph," which were brought from Spain more than two hundred years ago. The ceiling is rudely frescoed in representation of the sun, moon, and stars, the work, in the beginning of the present century, of an artist priest, whose name is somewhere inscribed beneath the dust that for generations has been settling upon this labor of love and devotion.

The Acomas are a free and independent race, preserving their pure Indian descent and tribal characteristics. they possess and jealously guard an antique, strongly made chest, secured by a giant padlock, in which are various old papers and parchments bestowed upon them by the early Spanish rulers, or bequeathed them by priests, comprising grants of privileges, title-deeds, missals, and other documents, which they regard with much reverence, and preserve with care. Like the Zunis, and several other of the Pueblo tribes, the Acomas maintain in their principal estufa the sacred fire. A member of a military commission visiting this pueblo twenty years ago relates that as a special honor the party were taken to the estufa. To reach this underground apartment — a chamber about thirty feet long by fifteen feet in width — they descended a smoke-begrimed ladder through a trap-door, which also served as a chimney. Seated around the fire, each with a loom in front of him, on which he was weaving a blanket, were four Indians, whose only garment was the breech-cloth. The Indians told the visitors that these men were relieved at stated times by four others, and that the fire was kept forever burning, waiting for the coming of Montezuma, the demi-god of the golden or heroic age of the Pueblos, who had promised on his departure centuries ago to return to resume his sovereignty and to deliver and exalt his people.

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