



Doña Jesusita Aragon (1908-2005)

Partera (Midwife)



In the early 20th century, Parteras (midwives) were the primary maternity caregivers in New Mexico, with more than 800 known practicing throughout the state. Being that New Mexico was culturally isolated from the rest of the country, and not yet urbanized or industrialized, meant that physicians were scarce and expensive, road conditions were poor making transportation difficult, and many people were living under impoverished conditions. Imagine how challenging life was, then add childbirth. The services of parteras were vital to New Mexican mothers and babies!

Parteras were among a group healers, or medicas, that also included yerberas (a healer specializing in herbal “remedios”) and sobadoras (a healer who uses massage), all practicing “curanderismo,” a folk healing system reliant on natural remedies and prayer (combining medicine and spirituality); a staple of village life.

Learning the art of midwifery required an apprenticeship through maternal lines. It was a great honor to be chosen and these women were highly respected within their communities, with families often preferring their services to trained physicians. Understanding the importance of tradition and cultural ties, the New Mexico Department of Health developed a partnership with Parteras in the 1930’s, a relationship that continues today, with physicians and midwives working together to ensure healthy pregnancies.



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In San Miguel County in 1936, parteras attended 701 of 972 births (72%)! No doubt Jesusita Aragon (1908-2005) was among them. Doña Jesusita was a healer and midwife. Born on a ranch in Sapello, known as El Rancho Trujillo in 1908, she delivered her first baby when she was only thirteen years old. "My grandmother, Dolores Gallegos, a midwife, taught me," Jesusita recalled. "She wasn't there that day because she went to deliver another baby. One of my aunts had a baby, so I had to help her. But I knew everything." Jesusita went on to deliver over 12,000 babies over the course of her 80 year career!

The art of healing ran in her family. Her Tia Valentina, the curandera of the family, taught her the use of traditional healing herbs, nurturing the passion Jesusita had for healthcare. Regarding her childhood dreams, Jesusita said, "I wanted to go to school to be a nurse, but years ago, they didn't believe in education. I only went to the eighth grade, and it was all in Spanish. It's a miracle that I can talk a little English. I learned reading the papers."

A single mother of two, and the sole provider for them, she built her own house and furnishings, equipped with a room in the front that held 10 beds for expectant mothers. She cared for her family by gardening and raising animals. In 1942 she moved to Las Vegas, where she supported her children by washing clothes, cleaning houses, making tortillas, and delivering babies. In the room with ten beds she delivered about 10 babies a night (over 200 per year), charging \$10 early in her career, increasing the cost to just \$125 by the early 2000s. Among her deliveries were twenty-seven sets of twins and two sets of triplets.

Sources:

Santa Fe Living Treasures

<http://sflivingtreasures.org/index.php/treasures/186-jesusita-aragon.html?showall=&limitstart=>

Journal of Midwifery & Women's Health (PDF)

"History of Midwifery in New Mexico: Partnership Between Curandera-Parteras and the New Mexico Department of Health" by Felina Mychelle Ortiz CNM