



Voices from the Gaps

Esther Martinez

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For breakfast we would have oatmeal, water, and bread. The boys would sit on one side and the girls on the other side of the cafeteria. We had oatmeal everyday. It was not so bad. Noontime was when we get meat, potato, and gravy, but if there is oatmeal left over from breakfast that goes in the gravy, and then supertime [we] get beans. Now the gravy from the oatmeal from breakfast is in the gravy for the beans. All that is left over from the day gets mixed with the beans. We never just got beans.

— Esther Martinez

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Quick Facts

- * Born in 1912
- * Native American author and educator
- * Wrote *My Life in San Juan Pueblo*

Biography

I'm honored to be sharing with you a glimpse about my Sa'yaâ's life and her work as an educator, author and master storyteller. Her name is Esther Martinez (aka P'oe Tsáwä, Blue Water, and Estefanita Martinez.) At home she is known to our family as Sa'yaâ' (grandmother) or to community members and students as Kó'ôe (Aunt) Esther.

My Sa'yaâ often introduces herself by saying she was born in 1912, the same year New Mexico became a state and the Titanic sunk. This serves as a metaphor for the birth of a new period in history, and the latter metaphor parallels much of Martinez's life.

This page was researched by Matthew J. Martinez and submitted on 4/5/05.



Esther Martinez

Biography continued

Martinez spent the early part of her life living with her parents in Ignacio, Colorado. She refers to this as Ute Country where her parents, much like many Pueblo people, worked in the fields in the early twentieth century. Martinez recalls one day when her grandmother traveled from San Juan Pueblo to visit her parents. As a young child Martinez was a tag along and wanted to join her grandmother on her trip back to Pueblo Country. Not knowing how long the ride would be, Martinez and her grandparents traveled for days on a covered wagon to San Juan Pueblo. Once in San Juan Pueblo (Ohkay Owînge), she would be their errand girl to help around the house.

Soon after her arrival to San Juan Pueblo, Martinez became part of the federal government's "civilizing efforts" which placed Indian children in boarding schools. Martinez was sent to the Santa Fe Indian School, about 25 miles south of San Juan Pueblo. In the 1920s this was an entire day's travel. Martinez vividly recalls her time at the boarding school: "They gave us a bath right away when we got there and washed our hair. I don't know how many years I got bathed by a big girl. There were two wash tubs side by side. We took turns and had to stand in line. Sometimes the girls would trade things to buy a place up front. We had a bath just once a week and it was the same water for everyone. We were so little we didn't care who looked at us. I always remember being chapped. When we get through bathing they [school matrons] would give us a hunk of Vaseline to put on our faces and hands so we won't be so chapped. The towels we had were not towels like we have today but they were like brown paper towels. They didn't dry good and felt like paper bags on our face. I guess that is why we were always chapped."

In other conversations my grandmother recalls the harsh punishment that she received for speaking her Tewa language. At a young age children were forced to shed their Native culture. Martinez' toughest time was being alone at school. She missed her grandfather, who told her stories at nighttime. She states, "... yes we had nice clean beds and sheets but at night there was no grandfather or grandmother to spend time with, it was lonely." Martinez yearned for a fresh home-cooked meal in the warm company of her family. Instead, she remembers being assigned to work in the kitchen to cook, clean and do laundry. Martinez recalls the following about the boarding school nutritional system:



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Biography continued

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Martinez graduated from the Albuquerque Indian School in 1930. Throughout the rest of her adult life Martinez dedicated herself to raising ten children and working in a multitude of service jobs in northern New Mexico. These jobs varied from cooking and cleaning in Los Alamos to being a janitor at the local John F. Kennedy School in San Juan Pueblo. It was at this school that a linguist by the name of Randy Speirs approached her about documenting the Tewa language. At that time Martinez was around 54 years old - thus began her quest as an educator. Martinez enrolled in several linguistic courses and was soon hired to teach Tewa at the San Juan Day School. She served as Tewa Instructor and Director of Bilingual Education for over twenty years. During her tenure at the Day School Martinez published *The San Juan Pueblo Tewa Dictionary*, various language curriculum guides and served as a consultant for language initiatives at other pueblos. In 1992 Martinez published one of her favorite stories as a children’s storybook, *The Naughty Little Rabbit and Old Man Coyote*. The initial San Juan Pueblo Tewa Dictionary has since been digitized into a CD-ROM for San Juan children to use in the classroom.

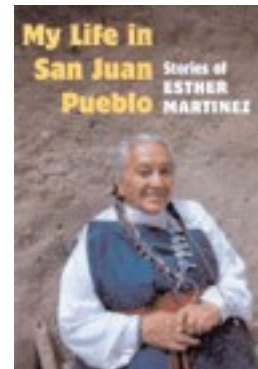
The contribution Martinez made to language and cultural preservation has not gone unrecognized. A few of Martinez’s honors include the National Association for Bilingual Education, Pioneer Award (1992), Living Treasure Award from the State of New Mexico (1996), Indian Education Award for Teacher of the Year from the National Council of American Indians, Woman of the Year Award (1997), New Mexico Arts Commission Governor’s Award for Excellence and Achievement in the Arts (1998) and the Indigenous Language Institute Award for “Those Who Make a Difference” (1999). In addition, Martinez has been featured in documentaries such as KOB-TV 4 Cavalcade of Enchantment series on storytellers and writers of New Mexico, A String Story and Surviving Columbus.



Esther Martinez

Biography continued

Among Pueblo people Martinez is best known as The San Juan Storyteller. Martinez recently published *My Life in San Juan Pueblo: Stories of Esther Martinez*. An excerpt from the back cover reads: “*My Life in San Juan Pueblo* is a rich, rewarding, and uplifting collection of personal and cultural stories from a master of her craft. Esther Martinez’s tales brim with entertaining characters that embody her Native American Tewa culture and its wisdom about respect, kindness, and positive attitudes. Sure to bring a smile to readers of all ages, this enchanting glimpse of an oral tradition passed from grandfather to granddaughter also features a CD of the stories as told by Esther Martinez herself.”



The Women’s Section of the American Folklore Society recently awarded *My Life in San Juan Pueblo* the Elli Kōngäs-Maranda Prize (2004) and it continues to be used in many colleges and universities across the United States.

As an educator, matriarch, and community leader, learning to document the Tewa language and writing the stories of Pueblo people remained a central part of Martinez’s life. At 92 years old, Martinez continues to be consulted on various language and cultural initiatives. Today most of the time I find her at home working on her sewing or clay projects. The boarding school experiences remain vivid in her memory. The efforts of the federal government to “civilize” Indians and wipe away any remnants of Native culture and identity has in fact turned in the opposite effect for Martinez. In the case of Esther Martinez, language was used as a form of resiliency for Tewa identity and cultural preservation.



Esther Martinez

Selected Bibliography

Works by the author

The San Juan Pueblo Tewa Dictionary (1983)

The Naughty Little Rabbit and Old Man Coyote (1992)

My Life in San Juan Pueblo: Stories of Esther Martinez (2004)