

A Pioneer Family of Arroyo Seco
Growing Up in New Mexico
Gilbert Frank Maes, Jr
In Collaboration with Ann Safron Lewis

Preface

I met Gilbert Frank Maes, Jr., totally by accident. My husband and I were New Yorkers who in our retirement had moved to beautiful Scottsdale, Arizona. As we enjoyed a new way of life in a marvelous milieu, totally relaxed, dining out soon became part of our daily routine.

It happened at a local Coco's to which we had begun to go for breakfast every morning. The manager, in having come to recognize us as "regulars", one day accommodatingly brought over to us a handsome young waiter and said "I would like you to meet Gilbert. He will be your server today."

Affable, delightful to talk to, Gilbert from then on would frequently be assigned our table. It was on those occasions, in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the busy restaurant, that in our friendly exchanges we would learn something about each others lives. Gilbert was intrigued by the fact that I was a writer. He had an unusual story to tell, and, luckily, I was forever interested in a good story! The combination was electrifying. As with many young people who aspire to other things, waiting on tables was a temporary means for Gilbert to achieve his goals. Before we knew it storyteller and writer were collaborating on a wonderful project ... an account of the history of a little town in New Mexico called Arroyo Seco.

I found that Gilbert's description of his youth in tiny Arroyo Seco, of his family's impressive role in the development of that town, was indeed worth writing about.

The following is his story as he told it to me. It is a sweet, simple story, shared with much feeling. Most of it is in Gilbert's own words. From time to time, however, I could not resist taking advantage of writer's privilege to express "things in my own fashion. In the end, the fun of putting together the many facts and details turned out to be just as memorable as the story itself.

Ann Safron Lewis
2005

Dedicated to My Parents
Gilbert Arthur Maes and Cora Jamillo Maes

and

In Loving Memory
of
Grandpa Joe Delferio Maes
and
Grandma Emily Petra Maes

A Pioneer Family of Arroyo Seco Growing Up in New Mexico

As people look to improve their condition, many success stories tell of a move from a simple location to the more sophisticated world of business and opportunity, "from the farm to the city" so to speak, from a rural village" or town to a large urban area. My family made the opposite change.

"Usted no pertenece aqui! Usted es un nino de la ciudad, un nino rico!" ... "You don't belong here! You're a city kid, a rich kid! Just six years old at the time, that's how my new classmates taunted me in the small country school my parents would soon enroll me in after leaving beautiful Los Angeles, California. We had left Los Angeles to settle in the town in New Mexico where my grandparents, Joe Delferio Maes and Emily Petra Maes lived ... the place where my father was born. The purpose of our relocation was to build a restaurant and ski lodge on my grandparents' property upon which their house, grocery and gas station already stood. My father, Gilbert Arthur Maes, my mother, Cora Jamillo Maes, my two older twin sisters, Debora and Sophia ... with me, little Gilbert Prank Maes, Jr. tagging along, for that reason had pulled up stakes, lock, stock and barrel, from the marvelous city of Los Angeles to start a new life in what, in 1966, was an undeveloped, ghost town of a place in New Mexico called Arroyo Seco.

Sandwiched in between two impressive spots, Arroyo Seco was located only nine miles from Taos known for its lovely art colony, and several miles in the other direction, from Taos Ski Valley, world-famous for its extraordinary elevation and marvelous skiing.

My father had been a machinist in California, my mother studying to be a nurse when we made the move to Grandma and Grandpa's tiny town surrounded by mountain, river and forest ... to that quiet one-horse town which, in its country like simplicity, would leave a sweet and memorable mark on me forever.

My New World in Arroyo Seco

Highly sensitive to fresh sights and sounds as most kids are, I shall never forget the marvelous sensations I experienced as I stepped out of the station wagon which had brought us to our new home. I was overwhelmed by the crisp smell of the clean mountain air, by the wind blowing through the tall aspen trees. It was so different from my world in Los Angeles.

Arroyo Seco turned out to be a wonderful place for a child to grow up. As time passed] would go fishing with my father in the nearby Rio Grande River, where we loved to catch rainbow trout and German browns. Though our pet poodle Sport had come along with us from California, when I was twelve years old I acquired a dog of my own. It was at the dog pound in Taos that I chose him. Part wolf and part German shepherd, he was a beautiful animal and became my great companion and friend. I named him Chicano. We enjoyed many adventures together. All I needed to say was "Chicano, let's go!" and like a streak of lightning he would be at my side in an instant. I could never get over the wide open spaces of the area. I would take Chicano to the stream which ran across from the house, where we would hunt for frogs. We would go for long hikes around Arroyo Seco and El Salto. "El Salto" means waterfall in Spanish. The El Salto waterfall was five miles up the road from us. Chicano and I would go up there all the time. There were also three giant caves which we explored. It was beautiful in the mountains up the road from our soon-to-be-built family's new El Salto Ski Lodge named after the waterfall.

Chicano, though he was larger and stronger than Sport, in being younger than Sport, had learned many good ways of behavior from our more experienced poodle. However, despite the fact that Sport was bright and well trained, he was unfortunately to eventually succumb to the cold winters of the area. He had suffered greatly from the frost and snow that would cake his entire body when he enjoyed the outdoors. I would soon lose Chicano as well. In following his natural instinct one day, as he went after some livestock on a local farmer's property, Chicano was shot by the farmer. I recall my distress as he lay bleeding in my lap in our car on the way to the vet's.

My beloved Chicano died at the vet's.

Family and Friends

On the day we had arrived to settle in Arroyo Seco, Grandma Emily was so excited to show us her house which had been newly enlarged to become a two-story house. We had visited Grandma and Grandpa many times before. Sometimes, we would fly TWA, sometimes we would take the station wagon. When we drove, we would go through Arizona to Flagstaff and then to Gallup where we would often stop to buy Native American souvenirs to bring back to family members in California. It was on that exciting day when we had arrived to live there, that for the first time we would see the house in its new appearance. We were to occupy that added second floor of our grandparents' home until the ski lodge was built. After it was finished, our family would switch to the top floor of the lodge.

My grandfather ran the grocery and the gas station. The restaurant and the lodge were built by my father and would, belong to him. When the restaurant was completed, my entire family would work there. My father was a cook, my mother a waitress. One of my sisters was a cook, another was a waitress. I would also help as I grew older. Later a fellow by the name of Pablo Flores was hired as a waiter.

From the very beginning, Grandpa Joe called me Pancho, which means Frank in Spanish. My father had always called my mother Cookie, a nickname which was used by others as well. As time went on my sisters and I made many friends. The kids at school who did not like me at first because I was an outsider ... who were unsure of me ... after they got to know me liked me more and more. I would bring candies and other goodies to school for the kids from Grandpa's grocery store. That helped win them over in a big way! Many of the kids from the village would shop at Grandpa's grocery since all the larger grocery stores were nine miles away in the town of Taos. Plenty of candy was sold in the store. Grandpa's grocery always had the marvelous smell of "double-bubble" bubble gum! And what fun my sisters and I had when we were permitted, whenever a new delivery arrived, to select from the truck what we thought were the hottest candy items for the store!

I had become good friends with the boy who lived next door. His name was Abey Bustos. We built a tree house for ourselves in the big willow tree behind the store. Another good friend was Julian Varas. He lived about a mile or two from the house. I would walk to his place or he would come and visit us. We enjoyed hiking to the waterfall "el salto" and going fishing in the Rio Grande. He was really cool I thought. Sadly, he was killed in a car wreck on his 18th birthday. I will always miss my good friend Julian Yaros.

More About Mom

My mother had given up much to come to live in New Mexico. She was to leave behind all of her relatives who lived near us in California. Not only would she miss her family but giving up her nurse's training was a great disappointment as well. She wanted so much to become a nurse. However, once our new life started in Arroyo Seco, Mom put her heart and soul into making it a success. Working in the restaurant was no easy task for her. She had never done anything like that before. Not only did she work in the restaurant, but she also ran the little coffee shop next to the formal dining room. Mom was great when it came to that little cafe. She did all of the interior decorating. She had excellent taste in choosing the china. When we had our grand opening we had no idea how busy the cafe would be. Amazingly, the place was packed. Mom handled it like a champion. She took orders, ran the cash register and served the food. At opening day we found that the tables in the cafe which had been bought at a sale were too small. They were tiny bistro tables. Bigger ones were then purchased. But for the first few weeks Mom had to make do. Many nights after the restaurant was closed, Mom would spend hours balancing the book from the day's intake. She used to call it a ledger and would balance it to the penny. She did all the paper work for the lodge and some of the grocery store paper work as well.

Mom was a devoted mother. She would always dress my twin sisters alike ... was interested in our academic achievement. She would teach us good vocabulary and was very involved in our school progress. When I started school I was given a course called "bilingual." The course's Spanish was much different from the Spanish we spoke. When I would bring my homework home, Mom was baffled by the Spanish the school was using. The Spanish of a small New Mexico town was more of a slang Spanish ... a dialect that they had created themselves. Mom made an appointment with the teacher, discussed the problem and it turned out that she was technically correct. In an education situation, colloquialisms, the language of the region or locale, should not have been used in their bilingual curriculum.

The Mariposa Ranch and Abe Garcia's Post Office

There was a family that had settled in the area with whom we had become very close. It was Felipe Cordova, his wife Cordy and their two sons Buffy and Dickie. They operated a 300 acre ranch called the Mariposa Ranch. My two sisters and I spent much time there. We loved visiting. We learned a lot about all kinds of livestock. The ranch was huge. It had pigs, cows, horses, sheep, and chickens. There was a tremendous barn with a rope above the haystack that my sisters, the Cordova boys and I would have fun' swinging on. My sisters learned how to drive a car on the dirt roads of the Mariposa Ranch. It was a great place to learn how to drive! There was also a "bottomless" pond on the ranch which we were forbidden to swim in. "Don't go near the pond!" Cordy Cordova would warn us. "It's too deep and too dangerous!"

I will always remember Abe Garcia, Arroyo Seco's postmaster. He ran the post office by day, and a bar at night. He played a big part in the history of Arroyo Seco. If you could see the post office as it looked back then, you would think you stepped back in time. It was such an old building. It had maybe fifty mailboxes in it. Grace Garcia, Abe's wife, was an Avon Lady in those days. It seems like the famous Avon Co. even discovered tiny out-of-the-way Arroyo Seco in which to sell their well-known products! Grace was a great Avon representative and offered a wonderful Avon sale every now and then.

No longer the postmaster of Arroyo Seco, good old Abe is still living there running the bar with his two daughters Olympia and Lena. The old post office was eventually torn down and a new one built just outside of the village. That's when one of Abe's daughters ran the post office for a few years. The really neat thing about the old post office was that Abe knew everybody by name and where they lived in the community. Many times when someone would come from out of town, they would obtain information from Abe as to where friends lived, etc.

Abe has remained a good friend of my father's to this day.

Mr. Concha and the Indian Reservation

Mr. Concha was a Native American who lived on the Pueblo Indian Reservation up the road from Grandpa Joe's grocery store. With merely the road and a small stream running between them, Grandpa's grocery store faced the wide open spaces of the reservation. There were bighorn cattle and buffalo roaming around so close just across the way from our house. The Sangre de Cristo Mountains, which were off in the distance; were so majestic! The reservation went on for miles and miles as far as the eye could see! There were no other Indian homes in the area where Mr. Concha lived at the foot of the mountains. We had come to know Mr. Concha from the many times he shopped at Grandpa Joe's grocery store. Mr. Concha also bought gas for his pick-up at Grandpa Joe's gas station. His home was about five miles up the El Salto Road which bordered the Indian land. Mr. Concha lived on the reservation with his wife. Once when Mr. Concha came to the grocery, he asked my sisters and me if we would like to take a tour of his place. We were so excited! We followed him up the El Salto Road in my father's truck! When we got to the end of the El Salto Road, we still had to drive up a winding dirt road to his place. As we approached his home the landscape all around us began to change. At first we were a little frightened. The woods were real thick and green with color. Suddenly there appeared a lovely adobe house sitting in the middle of a meadow beautifully surrounded by aspen trees and pine trees. When we reached the house, Mr. Concha's wife greeted us with a smile and kindly offered us some lemonade and oven bread. I remember her as a very nice lady. Though Mr. Concha was able to speak a little English, Mrs. Concha spoke only the language of the Pueblo Indian. After we enjoyed our treat, it was time for us to be shown the grounds. First we walked down a path surrounded by aspen trees to the "horno", an outdoor oven which was made of mud and straw like their adobe house. As we continued on we came to a clearing. In the midst of the clearing was a crystal clear pond surrounded by grass. There were a couple of cedar benches around the pond which Mr. Concha had constructed himself. Everything on his property was made from the land. He told us that when his grandsons who lived in the Pueblo village north of Taos visited, they swam in the pond. He had built the benches just for them. My sisters and I enjoyed visiting Mr. and Mrs. Concha's home on the reservation very much!

Politics, The Arroyo Seco Youth Association, Taos SkiValley, and Ernie Blake

As the restaurant and the lodge became a success, my parents would start to give much of themselves to the town and to the townspeople. My father and mother organized what came to be known as Beautification Day, where the people of Arroyo Seco on that special day would clean up the village as well as the local roadsides. It was really a great thing for Arroyo Seco. The town was developing fast. It was such an exciting event that my mother would provide the townspeople with a free lunch from our restaurant that day.

On a more personal note, my parents helped a woman of the town who was suffering from cancer. They organized a drive to assist her financially. Though sadly she did not survive, my parents had been at her side in her battle with the illness.

In my father's strong interest in the town's welfare, he eventually became involved in the political arena of the area. He became Precinct Chairman in 1975 and County Commissioner of the District of Arroyo Seco of the County of Taos in 1976. His political activities would bring him upon occasion to Governor Apodaca's mansion for social events as well as for political purposes.

My father's political involvement had begun at a time when I was growing older. I was no longer the young kid who was interested in going to the river, was no longer interested in exploring here and there. The same thing applied to many other kids in the village who, as they were maturing, were eager to find activities of a different nature.

In becoming aware of the need for a youth center in Arroyo Seco, my father, in using his political clout, made an effort to acquire government funds to establish a place for young people to go to. That is how the youth center at the parish hall began to take shape and how the Arroyo Seco Youth Association was eventually established. First, the roller skates made their appearance. That made a big hit with me and all the kids in the neighborhood. Then basketballs and volleyballs and all kinds of equipment started to pour in. When winter arrived we received 30 pairs of ski boots and ski poles. It was as a result of that delivery that we formed a Ski Club for those who were interested in winter outdoor skiing.

My father, and my mother who was a member of the Youth Association Board, were so happy to see the elation of the kids, the excited looks on the kids' faces as they watched all the equipment coming in.

However, now that we had the skis and poles, we still needed lift tickets and ski lessons. To accomplish that, my father, my mother, a group of kids and I went to the popular ski area not too far from us which was owned and operated by Ernie Blake and his family. It was only nine miles up Twining Road from Arroyo Seco. As we met with Ernie, we asked if he would be interested in sponsoring the Arroyo Seco Ski Club. He agreed to help by giving the Ski Club 30 passes per day as well as ski lessons. It was through the generosity of Ernie Blake that many of the kids of Arroyo Seco became avid skiers. The only stipulation was that the kids had to be bona fide residents of Arroyo Seco to receive the lift tickets and ski lessons. Thus, it was as a result of the kindness of Ernie Blake that I learned to ski. As I grew older, it was through my love of skiing that I was eventually to become a ski instructor right there where it all started, at Ernie Blake's magnificent, world renown Taos SkiValley.

The Passing of Grandpa Joe

There were great changes taking place in Arroyo Seco as time went on. Grandpa's grocery store was not as popular as in the early days of the town.

The town of Taos, just nine miles away, was beginning to develop more and more. Not many people were shopping at Grandpa's grocery store or gassing up at his gas station any more. Also, as Grandpa was getting older his health began to fail. I still remember him trying to keep the store going even after he became ill. He was so nice to all of his devoted customers. He would often give groceries away free, which would not help his finances.

Grandpa Joe passed to the heavens in 1980. The grocery and the gas station closed shortly afterwards.

Grandpa Joe had shared with me many stories of the old days of Arroyo Seco. He told me of the gold mining days in Twining valley ... of his working in the mines as a young man. The mines were located up the Twining Road which now leads to Taos Ski Valley. Grandpa would describe how he rode horse-pulled wagons to get to work. The mines no longer exist ... just remnants of them like an old mine slide and an old mine shaft.

Grandpa Joe, whom I loved so much, and who so many of the people of the town cared for, had played an important role in the history of Arroyo Seco.

2005 - Arroyo Seco And Our Family Today

It is nearly 40 years since that day in 1966 when my parents, my sisters and I arrived in our station wagon to live in Arroyo Seco.

As things turn in the world, as they go from the ups to the downs, from the downs to the ups in the wheel of life, Arroyo Seco is now a lovely, bustling little place with a bed and breakfast here and there, with businesses and tourists.

With Grandma Emily's passing in 2000, both my grandparents are now gone. Pioneer settlers of Arroyo Seco who were much loved by the community, it was in following their wishes that they are buried in the cemetery on Des Montes Road, right on the outskirts of town.

The El Salto Ski Lodge, the restaurant, the grocery, the gas station and the house are painfully these days overgrown with weeds ... that lovely piece of property which holds so many memories for me, sadly all boarded up and for sale.

I still have the precious recipes we used in our restaurant in my head ... marvelous family recipes preserved and cherished, secret and in my memory, to be used with delight in a restaurant I hope to open of my own someday.

I will never forget what my loving Grandpa Joe told me as I was growing up: "You will always have a good return, Pancho, if you follow your dreams, if you follow your aspirations!"

I try to live by his words everyday.