

My Visit to a Native American Religious Ceremony

I had had the opportunity to attend one of the 19 Native American Religious ceremonies in New Mexico. The name of the village is Jemez Pueblo; it's located in North Central New Mexico, in Sandoval County, about 50 miles northwest of Albuquerque. Jemez is the only culture where the members still know how to speak the language of "Towa". The village is called "Walatowa" which means, "This is the place". Last August my family and I decided to visit the village of Jemez which was something new for us. It started because my son wanted to go and visit the place where they have Alpaca farms, and my husband and I wanted to see how the Native American Religion was celebrated in Jemez. Driving towards the Jemez Mountains was nothing new when it came to sight-seeing in New Mexico. At first the view was only dry bits of land, but once we were near to the festival of "Nuestra Senora de los Angeles Feast Day de las Peninsula", we drove more into the Mountain range, which made for a more interesting view.

Deep within these Mountains was the village of Jemez, a place where I had never been before. There were lots of cars parked in dirt parking lots and many people walking around. Nobody cared about the dust that overshadowed the lots. The first thing that we smelled after getting out of the car was the smell of burning wood that filled the air. It was incense burning, along with the aroma of cooked meat. People were talking and laughing and walking everywhere. I was expecting to see tents, or, I guess, not really sure what I really was expecting to see, but as we were approaching the festival it was not as I had imagined it to be. There were no tents, no community centers, it was just a dirt plaza and a number of private houses made of adobe that surrounded the plaza, where different vendors were selling a lot of pottery and handmade jewelry, Indian bread, deer jerky. They were also selling arrow heads and handmade weapons.

When I asked one of the vendors what they were celebrating, he told me that the feast was to remember the day the Spaniards feasted with the natives, as well as to keep the tradition living. Also, they were celebrating the Day of "Nuestra Senora de los Angeles". He told me to go into any of the houses that I wanted to go to have lunch, because there were free meals to all people. All of the food was free of charge. At first, I could not decide whether or not to go inside the houses, but we decided to enter, and the family gave us a happy welcome. They gave us a small bowl of cooked beef soup and side dishes, even pastries. After we finished eating we thanked them and went back to the plaza to watch the Native American dances and rituals. It was important that the public did not interrupt, talk to, or clap for the dancers, since they were dancing traditionally, as well as praying. Some people who did not know about the clapping and non-interaction were not penalized, but it was just a sign of respect for the dancers. Some of the Native Americans were talking in their native language "Towa". One of the dances was called the dance of "Los matachines". The dancers were wearing different kinds of colored clothing adorned with beautiful beads and feathers of different colors. They kept the church open for a little while. What the church has inside is comparable to the Catholic Church. There are images and saints, and they have the altar and pews, and holy water as Catholic Churches do. Cameras and camcorders are not allowed inside the church. Some of the dances were dedicated to super-natural beings to bring rain. The Jemez Pueblo count on following a cacique, or religious leader and captains. The cacique is the one who watches the Sun to determine the dates of ceremonies.

Over all, I loved the experience and would definitely invite people to go and experienced the Jemez Native Religion.