

Penitent Brotherhood

American Citizens Who Are Hanged Upon Crosses

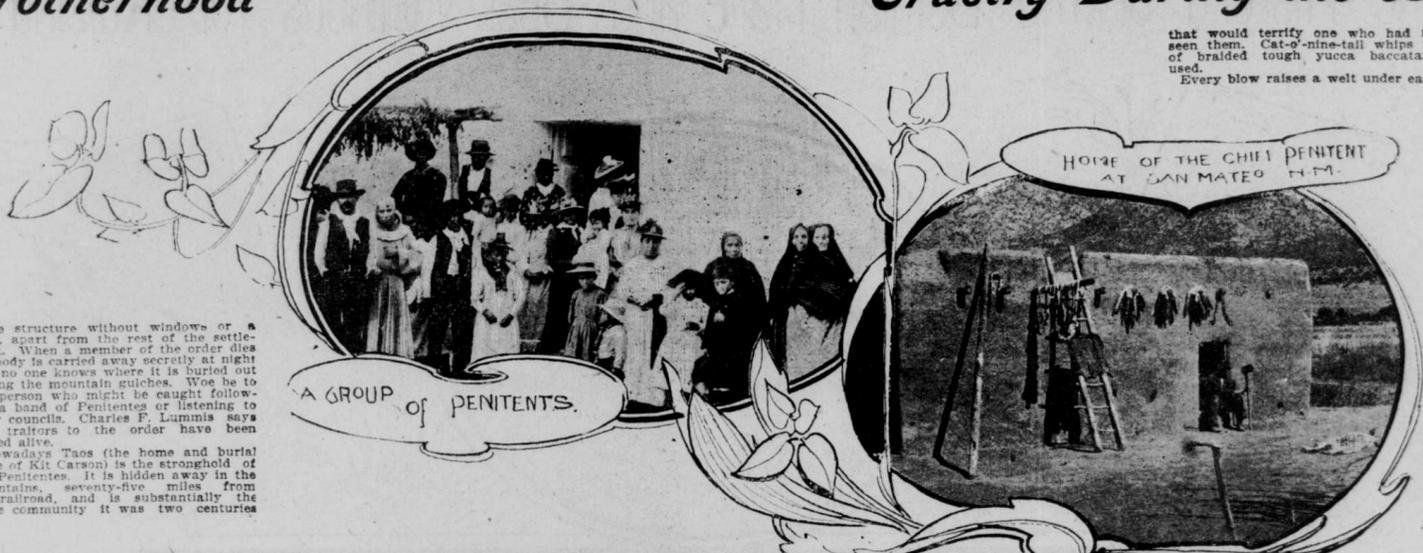
THE Americans who count themselves fortunate in having seen the Passion play at any of its performances once in ten years at Oberammergau probably do not know that there takes place annually in their own country (during the last week of the Lenten season) and within 35 miles of Denver) a Passion play so frightfully fierce that the sacred drama of the German peasants is simple child's play in comparison. Among the Raton and Santa Fe mountains (a southern spur of the great Rocky Range), in Northern New Mexico, American citizens are these very days slashing their flesh, shedding their life blood, stoically enduring excruciating agonies and finally are crucifying chosen ones of their brothers, all because they believe these torturous barbarities absolve them from past sins and some future ones. These fanatics number some 700. They are known throughout New Mexico as the

stone structure without windows or a floor, apart from the rest of the settlement. When a member of the order dies his body is carried away secretly at night and no one knows where it is buried out among the mountain gulches. Woe be to the person who might be caught following a band of Penitentes or listening to their councils. Charles F. Lummis says that traitors to the order have been buried alive. Nowadays Taos (the home and burial place of Kit Carson) is the stronghold of the Penitentes. It is hidden away in the mountains, seventy-five miles from the railroad, and is substantially the same community it was two centuries

Crucifixion During the Lenten Season

that would terrify one who had never seen them. Cat-o-nine-tail whips made of braided tough yucca bacata, are used. Every blow raises a welt under each

Slashed With Knives and Agonized With Cactus Thorns



A GROUP OF PENITENTES.

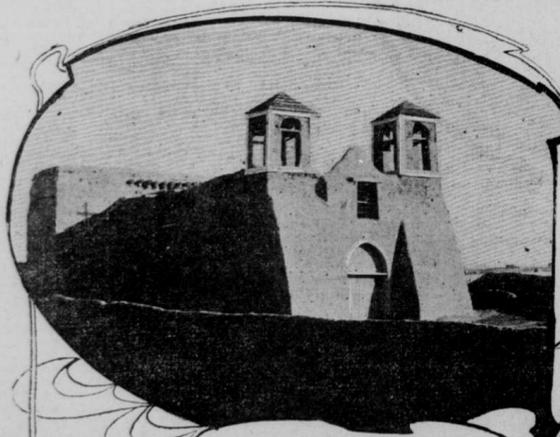
HOME OF THE CHIEF PENITENT AT SAN MATEO N.M.

lacerations from recent flagellations. Some backs are raw and bleeding. The man who has been chosen the Christ staggers pitifully at the rear under a crushing weight of a heavy cross of oak timbers. But he is performing a part that he has sought for these many months. He is loosely wrapped about the loins with a cotton fabric, as the Nazarene is always pictured on Calvary. A splash of red blood on his side symbolizes the wound that Jesus Christ had on the cross. About his forehead is bound a wreath of hickory cactus, pressed so deep into the flesh that tiny streams of blood trickle down his face and among his black whiskers. His broad back is a mass of bloody, angry flesh from frequent scourgings in the past week. How one in his physical condition can endure such pain and bear up such a load with his bare shoulders is only explainable on the ground of insane fanaticism that sometimes gives extraordinary power. The procession of 100 or 150 Penitentes



G. ROSS

Penitentes—the full name being Los Hermanos Penitentes (the penitent brotherhood). In former years there were several thousand Penitentes, and their annual Passion play during Holy Week of Lent was so savagely realistic that deaths of performers occurred almost every year. When General Lew Wallace was Governor of New Mexico in 1873 and 1881 he brought the attention of the Government to the practices of the Penitentes. Charles F. Lummis, a litterateur of California, secretly photographed from a distance a party of Penitentes at San Mateo, in 1888, while they were hanging a brother on a cross, and later Mr. Lummis was shot by an assassin in the locality. It had become known to the brotherhood that the former had made the pictures and that he purposed using them in a book. The order Los Hermanos Penitentes had its origin in the strange spirit of asceticism by flagellation and self-inflicted physical agonies as a means of grace which overran Europe in the early part of the sixteenth century. The order was founded in Spain at about 1508, and was brought to Mexico by the Conquistadores under Cortez. The Conquistadores, who had followed in the wake of Coronado, in 1540, brought from the City of Mexico the doctrine of serving the Master by suffering bodily pain and mortification of the flesh. In the isolation of the Spanish pioneers among the Indians of the New World, hundreds of miles from any refining influence, the stern asceticism took quick and deep root. As years passed the Penitentes multiplied. Their doctrine of flagellation and doing penance by physical agonies grew fiercer and the followers of the cross among the Mexicans and Indians this day one may see beneath the coats of penance. While the American colonists were fighting at Bunker Hill and Yorktown some 200 Penitentes cut in New Mexico, cut off from all the world by vast mountains and trackless desert wastes, were making their way to the region of the Passion play of Holy Week among the Penitentes must go off the beaten paths of travel to the rude mud and stone built hamlets of Taos, San Mateo, Cubero, and Tejuque, and travel over grim, lonely and hard mountain roads. Even when he gets to the region of the Penitentes he must be cautious in his efforts to look upon any of the rites of the brotherhood. The order is wary of inquisitive, pale-faced spectators, and is bound together by secrecy unlike anything else in this country. It has several meetings at night on lonely mountain sides each year. During Lent each circle meets in a morada, a little



THE OLD ADOBE CHURCH AT TAOS N.M.

Penitents Bearing the Cross in Procession Around the Church at Taos, N. M.

were black to his shoulder with blood stains. With the advent of Ash Wednesday the fanatics of the order come from the mountain settlements and gather secretly at the morada. In each group or circle of Penitentes there is the Hermano Mayor (chief brother), whose authority is supreme. In the old days he condemned to death heretics who opposed the holy order, and his will was executed in divers secret ways. Every one of the forty Lenten days is observed by the fanatics of the order. The members live at the morada, sleeping on the earthen floor. There are semi-weekly flagellations—the more fanatical demanding extra scourging now and then. Once every three days each

member of the order grapples one of the huge, heavy crosses, made of tree trunks, almost as large as a telegraph pole. In the night, and with it across his naked shoulders, he starts dragging it to the campo santo (Calvary) and back—probably half a mile of travel in all. The purpose is to make the Penitente humble and to better appreciate the sufferings of the Master on the true Calvary. But when the last six days of Lent or Holy Week come the Penitentes redouble their efforts to square the religious accounts for the year by a fanatical stoicism probably unknown elsewhere except among the East Indian fakirs. At dawn every day in the Holy Week the Penitentes give themselves scourgings

the lashes. Over one shoulder and then over the other the Penitente beats the yucca branch with all the strength of his muscular arms. Then he scourges his lower back. Sometimes he even asks a brother to lay the lashes on. Backs as raw as beefsteak are common, and blood trickles from hundreds of wounds down the sufferer's legs. There are generally some veteran Penitentes, whose wild fanaticism finds the scourgings unsatisfactory. They bind for a few hours at a time clumps of buckthorn cactus to their bare shoulders so tight that though flesh it is wonderful that human beings can endure such pain and blood-shedding for a week. Fortunately for themselves the Penitentes are generally stalwart vaqueros.

Every night during Holy Week there are pilgrimages in a body to campo santo. At the head of the body strides the "plero" (sifer), who blows a shrill, unearthly wail, which will fill any stranger to his notes with a nameless dread when heard at night amid the weird solitude of New Mexico mountains. A companion bears a crucifix, and then follow the brothers doing penance. Naked, except for their overalls, they move slowly over the rough, stony trail with bare feet. Perhaps they are accompanied by other officers than the two leaders, and the officials may be known by the bands or sashes of thorns and black fabric about their foreheads. The march is to a cross, where the Penitentes kneel, go through a secret mummerly, wash themselves a self-prescribed number of times, and then take up the backward march to the morada.

The crowning event occurred on Good Friday, when the anniversary of Christ's death is celebrated with a drama of the crucifixion. Honorary members of the order of Penitentes, known as Hermanos de Luz (Brothers of Light), are called in then to assist in the passion play. These Brothers of Light are aged and feeble veterans of the Penitentes. One of them is dressed with a tinsel crown on his swart head to represent what the very crudely thinks is Pontius Pilate; another wears white cotton robes and long whiskers to represent Peter, and still another young Penitente is dressed in feminine garb to represent Mary, the mother of Christ.

At about 4 o'clock on Good Friday the crucifixion ceremonies begin. The Penitentes issue from their morada and silent form in procession, two abreast. The plero and the Hermano Mayor take their places at the head of the procession. The plero blows weirdly shrill notes on his musical pipe and the brothers go shambling slowly to campo santo. They are bare as to chests and backs and are hatless and shoeless. Every back in the procession is a mass of reddened welts and

moves slowly toward the campo santo. The plero blows a shrill, rasping air on the pipe that has come down through long generations of Penitentes. The brothers speak no word. The spectators who follow at a distance look on with frightened faces—familiar as the scene is to almost all of them. Arrived at the little hill chosen as Calvary, the Penitentes circle about a shallow excavation. The plero ceases his strange air. The Hermano Mayor gives a sign and a half-dozen young men seize the perspiring, panting wretch who comes staggering up the hillside with his mammoth cross across his shoulders. The pseudo Christ is thrown on the cross and several muscular arms bind his limp form with cords to cowhairs. If he has his senses and is very devout it is proper for him to exclaim in the jargon of this region: "Bind me not! Nail me, nail me to the cross like the blessed master!"

When the man has been bound as tight as the vaqueros know how the crown of cactus thorns is pressed closer upon his bleeding brow, the cross is lifted and allowed to drop with a thud into the excavation. A shiver of pain goes through the creature on the cross. He may groan slightly, but he never speaks. His family and relatives would approach him the rest of his days for such a breach. One cannot adequately tell the weirdness of the crucifixion scenes among the southern western valleys of the Rocky Mountains. The picture of an apparently lifeless and nude man hanging from a rude cross, surrounded by half-naked, dark-visaged, rough and bewhiskered men in the shadows of a departing day would never fade from any one's memory. But the reverential silence of the assemblage, the brown backs redmed with blood, the lone grandeur of the everlasting mountain that are known nowheres in the world. Hardened as the spectators are these lonely valleys are to these annual crucifixions an intense hush comes over them and every one gazes in awe at the central figure raised aloft on the cross. The person from a civilized community who looks upon a scene like this for the first time feels the blood pounding in his ears.

The old adobe church of Fernandez de Taos was for several generations the headquarters for several thousand Penitentes. Father Brun finally stopped such sacrifice in the church when he went to Taos in 1875, and after he had a persistent and dangerous battle with fanaticism. To this day one may see beneath the coats of whitewash the dark splashes on the interior church walls where the blood of men spurted while they slashed their flesh during each year. During Lent each circle meets in a morada, a little

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A BIT OF TAOS N.M.