

ENCOUNTER WITH THE PENITENTES



Charles Lummis had been in San Mateo, New Mexico -- living at the home of his friend Amado Chaves, recuperating from an apparent stroke he had suffered in Los Angeles -- for less than two months when he got a lucky break in his budding career as a freelance writer. A grisly event seldom seen by outsiders took place in a canyon near the village, which he managed to capture in words and pictures. His story and photographs were eventually picked up by newspapers and magazines across the country. These excerpts from American Character, a new biography of Lummis, recount how Lummis got the story that he always considered one of the proudest achievements of his journalism career.

On one of his visits to the village of San Mateo in early March, Lummis's curiosity was piqued by an eerie shriek drifting down from one of the side canyons in the foothills flanking the village. When he asked the townspeople about the noise, they tried to discourage his curiosity, but he soon coaxed an explanation out of them. The sound was that of a fife-like reed instrument called a pito, which was used in the religious rituals of the Penitentes.

A Catholic cult with mysterious roots, possibly reaching back to Spain in the Dark Ages, the Penitente Brotherhood had been entrenched among the peons of the Rio Grande Valley for more than 200 years.

The group met a broad range of educational, social aid, and political organizing needs of its members, but the Penitentes were best known as devotees of self-flagellation. Designated members of the group whipped themselves bloody in private ceremonies every Friday night from Lent until Palm Sunday and then every day until Holy Thursday, when they began a round of public processions that ended with the reenactment of a crucifixion on Good Friday.

When Lummis heard about this, Good Friday was three weeks away. It's not hard to guess what immediately crossed his mind. He knew he had in his grasp a shocking scoop that could ignite his freelance writing career: a first-hand account -- accompanied by the first photographs -- of a crucifixion on American soil.

As soon as the Chaveses got wind of Lummis's plan, they tried to talk him out of it. The Penitentes were notoriously secretive, having been suppressed -- sometimes violently -- for hundreds of years. The Chaveses weren't certain they would tolerate an unobtrusive gringo observer, not to mention a gringo pointing a large camera at them. The Brothers might well try to kill him if he tried to do that, the Chaveses warned. Lummis heard them out. He was aware of the risks. But that only steeled his resolve to get the story. Besides, the danger of it all would give him a better story to tell, a new episode in the legend of the intrepid Charlie Lummis.

As Lummis told it in one of his half dozen or so published accounts of his scoop, "As the midnight wind sweeps down the lonely canon, the wild shriek can be heard for miles. It carries an indescribable and uncanny terror with it. That weird sound seems the wail of a tortured soul. I have known men of approved bravery to flee from that noise when they heard it for the first time. The oldest inhabitant crosses himself and looks askance when that sound floats out to him from the mountain gorges." But not Lummis.

"I had been watching feverishly for Holy Week to come," he continued. "No photographer had ever caught the Penitentes with his sun-lasso, and I was assured of death in various unattractive forms at the first hint of an attempt. But when the ululation of the pito filled the ear at night, enthusiasm crowded prudence to wall."

The reception Lummis got from villagers when he attempted to photograph a procession of flagellants on Holy Thursday didn't bode well for his plan to shoot the crucifixion the next day. The sight of his camera "provoked ominous scowls and mutterings on every hand." But Lummis sent a clear signal that he wasn't going to be intimidated. He placed his pistol on top of the camera. That night, Lummis got a chance to employ diplomacy to woo the Penitente leaders when they dropped by the Chaves hacienda for dinner. "Metaphorically collaring the Hermano Mayor, the Hermanos de Luz, and the pitero, I dragged them to my room, overwhelmed them with cigars and others attentions, showed and gave them pictures of familiar scenes -- a Mexican finds it hard to resist a picture -- and cultivated their good graces in all conceivable ways" Lummis wrote. "And when the Brothers of the Whip had supped, re-masked themselves and emerged, the Chief Brother and Brothers of Light were mine."

The next day, the entire village was on hand for the climactic rite. In the procession this time only one hooded man carried a cross, the one of the five cross-bearers from the day before who had the honor of being chosen for crucifixion. Several other men followed behind him, beating themselves with scourges, while another brought up the rear with a bundle of buckthorn cactus bound tightly to his back with the vicious inch-long needles, tough enough to penetrate shoe leather, piercing his back in hundreds of places. Lummis fell in behind with his camera. When the procession reached the crucifixion spot, Lummis's diplomacy the evening before began to pay off. Many in the crowd still glowered at him. But the Hermanos Mayor was moved to return Lummis's hospitality from the previous evening. He walked 100 paces away from the hole in the ground where the cross would be planted, drew a line in the dirt with his shoe and said Lummis could stand behind it to photograph the event.

The man who had been chosen for crucifixion had a four-inch gash in his side. When he reached the spot chosen for the ritual on a hillside in one of the canyons back of town, several of the Penitentes lifted the cross from his shoulder and laid it on the ground. He lay back on it and his attendants cinched him to it with rough ropes around his legs and arms pulled as tightly as the bindings on a mule. As they tightened the ropes, the man on the cross "sobbed like a child," Lummis reported, not because of the pain but because he was ashamed that they were not using nails instead. "Hay! Que estoy deshonorado! Not with a rope! Not with rope! Nail me! Nail me!" he

cried. Up until that year, the victims had been spiked to the cross. But that grisly practice was in decline as a result of the bad publicity from the rising death toll. The year before, four men had perished while nailed to crosses in Penitente communities in southern Colorado, Lummis claimed.

The ropes were brutal enough. As Lummis watched and the minutes passed, the victim's arms swelled and turned purple and he groaned with pain. Meanwhile the Penitente with the load of cactus lay on his back at the foot of the cross with his head on a stone and another larger stone placed on his stomach, pressing him more firmly into the backpack of cactus.

At 100 paces, Lummis was too far away from the scene to get the shot he wanted. So he decided to press his luck by asking permission to move closer. "In gracious response to my request, the Hermano Mayor paced off thirty feet from the foot of the cross and marked a spot to which I might advance in order to get a larger picture," Lummis wrote. "And there we stood facing each other, the crucified and I – the one playing with the most wonderful toy of modern progress, the other racked by the most barbarous device of nineteen hundred years ago. What ambitious amateur ever dreamed of focusing on such a sight?"



Lummis got started that night writing his magnum opus about the Penitente ritual. While many newspapers ran shorter versions of it over the next couple of months, the longer article was rejected by more than a dozen magazines over the next year. Lummis was convinced many editors simply didn't believe the macabre tale he told, even though he supplied photographs to prove it. It was finally picked up by Cosmopolitan which published his story along with a dozen engravings based on his photographs in May 1889.