

# Ganados: Revitalization of Rural Life in Northern New Mexico

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*Maria Varela*

*From a March 23 letter to Festival staff:*

Ganados del Valle/Tierra Wools is an effort of community people to utilize weaving, sheep raising and other traditional practices to strengthen our community and culture. Today, *as well as* during the last 400 years, our way of life is based on the need for sustenance, spirituality, family and community. Weavings created in this context are both artistic and spiritual expressions as well as successful in contributing to the economic underpinnings of our culture.

Weaving in New Mexico was either sustained or destroyed by numerous interventions over the last 300 years. And while there is on-going debate about their impact, many Native American and Hispano families weaving today are descended from those who had been involved with the trading posts, the railroad, anthropologists, assorted academics, the WPA, the New Deal programs, and poverty programs of the 1960s.

These interventions came from people and institutions external to villages and Native communities. Among the impacts was the severing of the cultural practice of weaving from its economic and social role. The commercialization of agriculture, agricultural modernization programs by the BIA and Land Grant Universities and the replacement of churro/Navajo sheep with the greasier commercial breeds disconnected weaver from flock. Mill-spun yarn, often from New Zealand, was purchased by weavers wanting to use a quality yarn which they could afford. Meanwhile, locally-grown wool went begging on the commercial market and family farms/ranches languished.

Another impact of external interventions was the mystification of folk art that has led most young people in our villages to believe that unless they are “artists,” they could not be successful in weaving.

Eight growers and weavers from the Tierra Amarilla area decided to form Ganados [in

1983] out of concern for their families, villages and way of life. People were selling their sheep which meant that agricultural lands would lay idle. This portended a decline in traditional agricultural activities. What would the next generation do with the land and water? The second concern was how to put the area back on its feet economically in a way that would strengthen the culture, create jobs and make agricultural land productive.

This group chose wool and weaving as one answer to economic revitalization because of a commitment to protecting culture, which meant to us the necessity of restoring an economy based on our native resources and cultural practices — especially at a time when the State of New Mexico was pushing a downhill ski resort for Tierra Amarilla.

Ganados established Tierra Wools and re-established the connection between the land, the flock and weaving. This current intervention has begun to revitalize the economy and inspire other villages.

Early on we discovered that our flocks still had remnants of the old churro breed. In 1984 we began to restore this breed within family flocks. Hearing of this, a group of Navajo weavers from the Ramah band became interested. The result has been a cooperative relationship between the two groups over the last eight years which has brought increased funding and technical assistance for both, recognition from the State Legislature and most recently the sharing of a computer expert in helping create accounting and inventory systems.

It is my hope that this letter will encourage you to make one of the clear focuses of the Festival how Ramah and Ganados have restored weaving to the core of our respective cultures.

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*Maria Varela, with Antonio Manzanares, founded Ganados del Valle in the Chama Valley of northern New Mexico. She is a MacArthur Fellow.*