

Above Water

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When I was a toddler, my parents would take my brother and me to play “Pooh-sticks.” We would gather up twigs and broken branches while walking to the irrigation ditch running at the back of our neighborhood. Once we reached the footbridge, crossing from our neighborhood over the ditch to Solar Road, the game would begin. Standing on my tip-toes, my eyes just barely peering over the bridge, I would drop a stick into the ditch. It would disappear into the muddy, opaque water for an instant and then bob to the surface and float under the bridge. I would run to the other side of the footbridge to watch the stick float down the ditch until I could no longer distinguish it from the water.

We repeated this game until we ran out of sticks, an amusement that kept us entertained continuously, despite the results being pretty much exactly the same each time. Maybe I enjoyed it because, despite being lost momentarily, the sticks always came out on the other side of the bridge intact.

The intricate network of irrigation ditches that snakes through Albuquerque’s North Valley dates back at least to the late 17th century. When the Spanish settled the Middle Rio Grande Valley they built *acequias*, as they are called in Spanish, to irrigate the valley. The Spanish adopted the methods of the Native Americans, who had been using ditches to irrigate their valley for hundreds of years. Today, these channels still funnel water from the Rio Grande through the valley, the ditches meandering through neighborhoods and between fields, shaded by verdant, overhanging cottonwood trees.

The ditches witnessed the Spanish Empire fall and Manifest Destiny beat its westward course across the continent. They watched developers subdivide the farms into residential lots over the last forty years, and though the Valley still retains its pastoral feel, not much farming remains besides in the occasional backyard veggie garden. While time has passed, the ditches have remained the same in appearance and function, irrigating fields with water drawn from the river. Landowners still irrigate as they did hundreds of years ago, with water rights growing more prestigious as resources dwindle. People flood their fields, the thirsty earth soaks up the water, and the ditches feed a band of green along the river, an oasis of life bursting from the desert.

Most of the residents of the North Valley, at least those without water rights, value the ditches not for the channels that carry water in the spring and summer and run dry in the fall and winter, but for the well-trod dirt paths that line both sides of each channel. My parents and I always choose to jog on the trails lining the ditches because they are shady, quiet, and secluded. More importantly, running alongside the ditches is safer than running on the narrow shoulder of Chavez Road or Guadalupe Trail, where drivers fly around blind corners and disregard the speed limit.

The ditches provide a network of trails guarded from the world of pavement and motor vehicles. For those familiar with the trails, this (as far as I know) unmapped lattice of footpaths provides an

array of shortcuts, from Tinnin Farms to the Bosque bike trail, from Casa Rondeña to Paseo del Norte. It takes years to master the ditches, to know when to cross over the six-foot-wide channel because the left bank becomes overgrown by reeds or the right bank narrows and becomes impassible. A few real footbridges cross over the ditches, but usually people cross instead on old wooden planks laid across bank to bank. These planks, though in place for as long as I can remember, still hold steady under my tread.

As I grew older, my time spent playing Pooh-sticks decreased. Instead, I spent my time running along the old, foot-beaten trails snaking through the Valley. I first started running in elementary school. Every Sunday morning, my dad and I would jog a 3-mile loop around the open space south of our house that we called the Vineyard. No one grows grapes in the Vineyard anymore. The area contains a community farm, fields of alfalfa and hay, and stretches of corn manicured into a corn maze every year. Our neighbors call the open space the Crane Field, for the Sandhill cranes that gather in the field every year on their migratory route south for the winter. I don't know the official name, or if the fields even have one.

Nonetheless, each Sunday, Dad and I made our loop around the fields. The last segment of the loop is on the ditch that runs along the northern edge of the fields, between the Vineyard and Alvarado Elementary. The footpath is raised above the fields and elementary school lot on a four-foot-or-so mound of packed earth. Old, knobby cottonwoods arch over the ditch on one side. On the other, the fields stretch out under the sun. The Sandia Mountains rise in the distance, blue-purple against a brilliant cathedral sky filled with wispy, paintbrush-stroke clouds.

In sixth grade, I joined the school cross-country team. Two weeks in, I came home and told my parents that practice was really hard and that I didn't know if I wanted to continue. The workouts were more intense than my casual Sunday runs with Dad.

"Give it two more weeks, Max," my mom said. "Then see if you still want to do it."

Two weeks went by. Maybe this could work out, I thought. I didn't look back for seven years of track and cross-country.

In seventh grade, I beat my dad for the first time in the "turkey-trot" our family ran every year on Thanksgiving, and he called my grandparents and aunts and uncles to announce the news of the new fastest member of the family. I ran on trails in the mountains, nearly stepping on bull snakes and tarantulas on a few occasions. I won handmade Native American pottery running a race at Acoma Pueblo and weathered a stampede through the woods at a national championship in Alabama. My favorite runs, though, were the ones kept cool by the shade of towering cottonwood trees as I passed grassy fields and backyards and dogs and chickens and goats.

I love the ditches because they showcase the Valley from a point of view completely different from the one I get driving down Rio Grande Boulevard, the Valley's main thoroughfare, which fronts on grand, rambling estates and their acres of land. On one hand, the road presents a manicured, carefully-maintained view of these expansive properties. Landowners trim their lawns, plough their

fields, and prune their trees. On the other hand, the ditches mostly face the back of these lots. The ditches present what I feel is a more authentic view, hidden from the eyes of passing motorists. Running on the ditch bank, I see a broken-down tractor sitting unused at the back of a lot. A pile of scrap metal rusts under the dry, hot sun. A sheepdog naps next to a chicken coop, only to wake suddenly at the sound of my tread. He chases me, barking and growling, as far as the fence hemming in his property will allow.

That lot on the Green Valley ditch never ceases to entertain, with a flock of peacocks decked out in their regal, luminescent plumage. Sometimes, on the Eakes ditch, I come within spitting distance of an emu. Further down the same ditch is the back of Los Poblanos, an historic inn and farm. When Joe Biden came to town for a fundraising event there, nobody could get anywhere near the inn in a car. Running on the ditch, through the cottonwood leaves, I glimpsed men in dark suits standing under the huge, whitewashed silos. Ominous black government SUVs sat in the gravel parking lot nearby. Beyond the lot I could see the fields of lavender, organized in neat, straight rows, intoxicated bees buzzing from bush to bush.

Over the years, as the North Valley has slowly changed, the ditches stay the same. They were the same one hundred, even two hundred years ago. This sameness can be comforting. Sometimes, after a few months away, I'll come back and expect Albuquerque or the Valley to feel different. Without fail, the big grassy lot on Guadalupe Trail is still for sale and cottonwoods arch over Chavez Road. I could have left them yesterday.

But the sameness can be stifling. In Nashville, my new home, construction cranes constantly perch on the skyline. It seems like a new glassy high rise appears each week. In my twenty years in Albuquerque, I've never seen a construction crane. The economy has been stagnant since the Great Recession. The skyline hasn't changed. The Sandia Mountains, rising 5,000 feet from the eastern edge of the city, serve as our skyline, my mom says.

Today, when I visit home and go for a run, sometimes I'll stop at one of the little unadorned metal bridges that span the ditch at a sluice gate, the horizontal red metal wheel controlling the gate locked and chained. My visits seem to get shorter and shorter these days. A month at the beginning of summer, a week at the end.

I pick up a stick fallen from a cottonwood, the ones that bend just so and make a satisfying *snap* as they break. Then, I drop the stick in the ditch for the satisfaction of seeing it get sucked into the mini-rapids created by the sluice gate, and I turn to watch it spit out from the eddy. I follow the stick as it floats down the ditch, hemmed in by a curtain of cottonwoods on both sides. My eyes take in the scene: this sanctuary of precious water in the desert.

I wish I could make my life here, stay home forever, but I know this place holds few opportunities for me. I don't yet know where I will end up. My future is not here. The muddy waters carry sticks and stories of the past, here in the hidden sacred heart of the Valley.