

For nearly sixty years, Isaac "Doc" Udell served the people of northern New Mexico as a small town physician, with a reputation of archetypal proportion. He came to Taos first in 1924, twenty-three years old, not yet finished with medical school. In the latter years, people were coming long distances to see him, from three surrounding states, often staying in local motels to wait for him. His story is classic, and yet unique in that much of the folklore about him is grounded in truth. He is a man who has long been loved and respected by many for the sincerity of his purpose and the caring honesty of his practice.

The anecdotal history of Doc is one of wild, often humorous tales of his unexpected eccentricity, humility, generosity and devotion. There are miracle stories and 'down home' yarns. It seems he had a dual gift of healing hands and an open heart. Until recent years Doc was on call twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, administering to his "flock." Doc himself claims to have delivered some ten thousand babies. It was his policy never to charge money for attending births. "What else is there in the world that is so free?" he would ask.

When he was paid for his services, it was not so often in the form of much-needed dollars as it was in hogs, sheep, eggs, chickens, turkeys, vegetables, fruit, adobes, or sometimes just plain rocks and gravel. He never sent out bills. He figured if you could afford to pay him, you'd mail him a check or stick something under his front door. If you couldn't, well, life turns out that way sometimes. He never kept books and probably didn't have the slightest idea who owed him money and who didn't. He didn't care. Doc was a man who believed that, given the chance, everyone was honest.

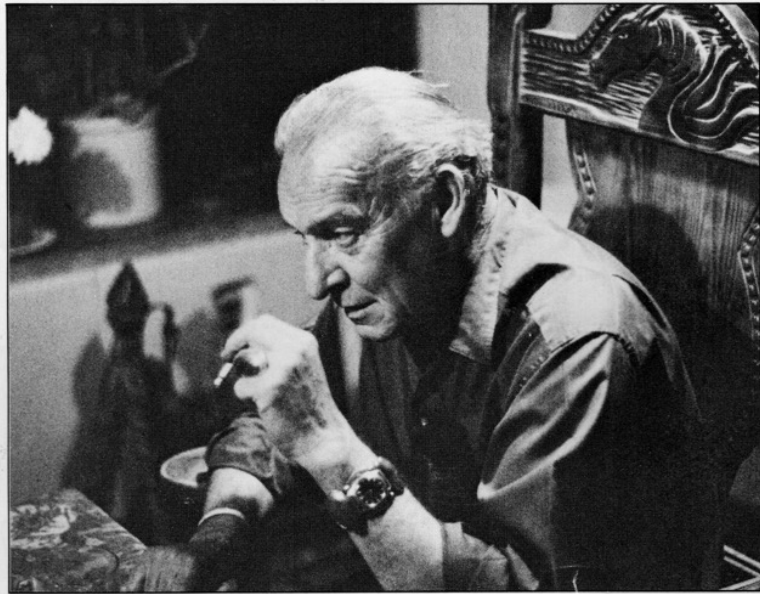
Wherever he went, he carried with him an old brown bag containing medicines and free samples. He'd rummage through it for five minutes, trying to come up with the "right tonic" rather than write out a prescription he knew his patient couldn't afford.

If you wanted him, you had to go and get him—No phone! Asked why, as a doctor, he didn't have a phone, his reply was typical of the man. "Most of the people in this area are very poor, and few have phones. If I had one, and they still had to come to the door to get me, it might embarrass them. This way, we're all sort of in it together."

Doc never mentions that, during World War II, after Air Force pilot training,

A GIFT RETURNED

The Life/Art Of Isaac Udell



he was sent on active duty where a plane crash broke him into pieces considered beyond repair. However, he was shipped to Fitzsimmons Hospital in Denver where he was finally put back together. His engaging, straightforward manner endeared him to all, and at point of discharge he was asked to remain on the permanent staff of this major medical facility. He did for some time, but the pull of New Mexico brought him back to where he felt he truly belonged.

Though not a rich man, especially by today's inflated standards, at 80 years of age Doc Udell has a wealth beyond measure. He is a man who owns his own soul.

Isaac Udell gave of himself, for a lifetime, to heal and to help others heal themselves. Few people knew of his avocation—the paintings of the stages of Penitente ritual, now in the custody of the Wurlitzer Foundation in Taos. He quietly worked on them through the years. A modest man, Doc did not aspire to display his work in the galleries of Taos, a town of artists, nor did he seek criticism or applause. He was unschooled as a painter, and yet his work is alive with the truth of his portrayal of human faith and experience. He was sensitive to his subject matter, aware and respectful of its source, its sacredness. Motivated by deep love for the history, the land and the people of northern New Mexico, above all else that may be remembered of him, these paintings are a testament to the greatness of spirit in a humble man.

"In New Mexico I felt like I belonged. I found a certain peace, security and vital interest. I liked the people. They seemed a part of what I sought. I lived and worked with and among them. The land and the people became a part of me, a rich and fulfilling part. New Mexico was my home, the first place as such that I could claim as mine.

"When circumstance removed me from New Mexico, I lived with a terrific and terrifying nostalgia. The land was within me, but I was without the land. My compromise was logical. I began the series of Penitente paintings. I felt that represented in this segment of faith was the one constant which had influenced the minds and culture of a goodly portion of the Southwest. Aside from the Indian culture, it was the one uninterrupted thread of heritage, and it was of the land.

"I can ask only, at the expense of appearing sentimental, that the story of the Penitent Brotherhood be received with understanding, charity and human kindness, in return for a knowledge of a people whose heritage is rich in bravery and daring, whose faith is deep and unquestioning, and whose conviction is sure.

"No claim is made for the artistic accomplishment in the paintings. If they merit claim as an historical documentation of a phase of Americana, if they give pleasure and insight to the observer (without any sense of exploitation of things sacred) then a gift will have been returned to a land and people I cherish, and whose memory is a part of my daily life."

—Dr. Isaac L. Udell



The Procession

The processions of the Penitentes occurred at almost any time of the day or night during the days of Lent. The processions were composed of officers of the order, the cross bearers, and the whippers (often a gallery of men, women, and children followed). Occasionally a lone exalting whipper was seen. The processions wound their way from the *morada*, the brotherhood house, to *calvario*, a cross located, usually on a hill, which may have been a distance of from a fraction of a mile to several miles, or to the nearest *campo santo*, the graveyard, where the pilgrims stopped before each grave offering prayers.

In every procession the *Hermano Mayor*, the major brother, who carried a crucifix, the *Rezador*, the reader, who chanted from a small hand-written copy book of ritual, and the *Pitero*, the flute player, who played the *pito*, a reed flute, were to be found.

“No one could predict in advance either a Van Gogh or a Gauguin, but it would be an honorable and distinguished boast on the part of any community (or State, or Parish) to be able to say, ‘We recognized here a talent in the making and gave it what we could in encouragement and support.’

“These Penitente paintings of Udell’s stand on their own feet as a great and moving epic. However weak they may be technically—and they are that—I prefer them a thousandfold to the technically glib and humanly empty work which we see in such profusion today.”

—Ben Shahn



Death Came During Penance

This was the announcing of death during penance of a brother. It was made by leaving some article of the deceased’s clothing, usually a pair of shoes, upon his door step—the only notice of his death, or admission of it. An occasional death occurred from loss of blood, exposure and pneumonia, especially in a season of raw cold winds or late sleet and snow.



Penitente Crucifixion

Crucifixion of one of the members was a regular occurrence and climaxed the activities of the Order until another Lenten season. Often only one crucifixion was held for several participating communities. The chosen subject was bound to the cross while it was lying upon the ground. Many cried out to be nailed rather than tied, but nailing had been abandoned. The cross was raised with the aid of guy-ropes until it "chuged" into the hole dug for it. Men nailed to the cross in earlier times remained conscious for several hours; those bound in later years remained conscious only a matter of minutes, since the circulation was so greatly impaired. Injury often occurred to the heart. When the man on the cross lost consciousness the cross was lowered (often a lengthy process). The limp form was then unbound and carried to the morada.



Tinieblas

Tinieblas service took place within the morada. The brothers stationed themselves before an altar and about a candelabrum upon which were lighted candles. One by one the candles were snuffed out; as the room became dark the *Rezador* and *Pitero* pulled the blanket completely about them so the light from their lantern did not show into the darkened room. The lantern was necessary to read the ritual which was too long to be memorized. When the room was totally dark, chains were rattled, shrieks pierced the quiet, and general pandemonium broke loose: such was the representation of the earthquake and storm after the crucifixion of Christ, when the graves yielded up their dead and when the wailings of souls in torment were heard.



A Prayer of Saint Francis of Assisi

Lord,
make me an instrument
of your peace.
Where there is hatred,
let me sow love;
where there is injury,
pardon;
where there is doubt,
faith;
where there is despair,
hope;
where there is darkness,
light;
and where there is sadness,
joy.
O Divine Master,
grant that I may not so
much seek to be consoled
as to console;
to be understood,
as to understand;
to be loved,
as to love.
For it is in giving
that we receive;
it is in pardoning
that we are pardoned;
and it is in dying
that we are born
to eternal life.

The Penitentes

by Issac L. Udell with Tricia Hurst

By the beginning of the Sixteenth Century, all of Europe enjoyed a peculiar unity under the name of Christendom. Most people owed allegiance and obedience to church and empire. The church served the spiritual needs of the people but it also exercised vast political power. Men were born, lived, and died in the ritual of the church.

Religion was the all-powerful influence in the mind and action of the time. Not the least of the church's responsibilities was education. One phase of education which reached the masses was carried on by the Franciscan Friars, a mendicant order, which went from home to home telling the stories of the lives of the Saints. In this way the Saints came very close to the people and were integrated into their daily lives.

These Medicant Franciscan Friars were, by Papal Charter, known as the Third Order of Saint Francis. And it was these Friars who most often accompanied Spain's gentlemen explorers and men of arms on their expeditions. These were the Friars who accompanied Coronado and his colonists to the New World, to the region that is now New Mexico.

Coronado arrived in San Juan, an Indian Pueblo on the Rio Grande river, with six hundred colonists, his men and the Franciscan Friars. Facing winter without food or shelter for this band, Coronado asked self-flagellation of his followers with a two-fold purpose in mind. First, as a form of thanksgiving for having arrived this far on his journey safely and, secondly, as a form of supplication to the Diety to aid and provide for them in this wild, new land.

Once the colonists were established, Coronado was ready to explore farther inland. Some of the Friars accompanied him; some went in search of new souls to convert, many were killed by hostile Indians. The eventual result was that the colonists were at last left without benefit of clergy. In this way, these men who could not conceive of life without Church, and not being able to celebrate the Mass, found it necessary to make use of that phase of religious legend that they were familiar with.

It was the lives of the Saints and the Passion of Christ, learned from the Franciscan Friars, that they chose to emulate. Hence, it may be said that Los Hermanos Penitente derive indirectly, if not authoritatively, from the Third Order of Saint Francis. The Third Order was known as a

penitent order and was described as a vast lay confraternity—practicing penance and charity among the poor.

Los Hermanos Penitentes, the Penitent Brothers, or simply Penitentes, as the members of the brotherhood are commonly referred to, are still known in areas of the southwestern United States. Until the mid-1940's, their practices remained as a surviving fragment of a medieval civilization, as the native in this rather stark and brooding land clung uninterruptedly to his religious heritage to sustain himself.

The ordeal of self-flagellation is nearly as old as man. There is nothing new in its use as atonement for sin. At one time in history, it was a privilege permitted only martyrs and godly men, even kings.

The Brotherhood, as it existed some thirty years ago, with many modifications and variations, re-enacted the Passion of Christ during the days of Lent.

The members of the Brotherhood who practiced the ritual were neither a segregated clan or class. They were the descendants of the Spanish colonists who brought a culture to the New World at a time when Spain was at the height of her wealth, power and glory.

Today, they are referred to as Spanish-Americans and their culture is the culture of the great southwest. They were normal men, going about the daily business of being ranchers, sheepmen, storekeepers, mechanics, clerks, teachers, etc. They lived common, everyday existences. Only during Lent, a time for penance and atonement for wrongdoing, were they in evidence as Los Hermanos Penitentes.

Their processions were once quite public, but with the advent of the *Anglo*, and especially the "touring American public," they began to suffer many indignities. This was mainly because of lack of understanding and sympathy. Over the years, they withdrew more and more into the secrecy of the land.

Time was, too, when the Church frowned upon the Brotherhood and excommunication was the penalty for avowing membership. However, in 1947, by Papal Decree, they (being all Catholics) were accepted into the church, as penitentes. There was, however, one stipulation: that their practices become less severe.

As technology, government, and modern civilization overtook them, their membership grew smaller. Soon, Los Hermanos, in all save the deep religious spirit which first moved them, passed into history as another chapter of the great and varied American scene.

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