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# In an Ancient Culture, America's Team Takes Root



Monica Almeida/The New York Times

Gertrude Concho, a Dallas fan, in Acoma Pueblo, which may be the oldest continuously occupied village in the United States.

By GREG BISHOP  
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ACOMA PUEBLO, N.M. — To the north, the Sky City casino draws truckers off Interstate 40 with its billboard advertisements promising loose slots and low limits.

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To the south, the towering sandstone mesa attracts tourists to a reservation without electricity or running water, with houses made from adobe clay and a church built in 1629.

Gilbert Concho, a 60-year-old master potter and spiritual elder of the Acoma tribe here, navigates these worlds. In his house, halfway between the traditions on the reservation and the new economy of the casino, he has transformed a spare bedroom into a shrine to the Dallas Cowboys.

It appears to have been designed by the team's owner, [Jerry Jones](#), himself: 40 Cowboys T-shirts, 15 pairs of socks, a dozen hats, 10 jackets, 2 blankets, a wine bottle bearing Mel Renfro's likeness, a pennant, an ashtray and a tortilla warmer, all awash in blue and silver.

Even here, in what the Acoma describe as the oldest continuously occupied village in the United States, the Dallas Cowboys connect a community fighting to maintain ancient traditions while adapting to the modern world.

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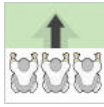
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Adobe buildings in Acoma Pueblo, which sits atop a 367-foot sandstone mesa.



The New York Times

Acoma Pueblo, N.M., about 700 miles from Dallas, is a hotbed of Cowboys fans.

Concho worries constantly. He frets about losing the next generation to drugs and alcohol and teenage pregnancy. He dwells on his declining health. And he wonders, like much of America, if the pop starlet Jessica Simpson is messing with the confidence of Cowboys quarterback Tony Romo.

"I worry we're losing our traditional ways," Concho said, sitting on a bed in his shrine, his feet tucked into Cowboys socks and moccasins. He abruptly switched topics. "And tell Romo to stay away from Jessica," he said. "We have a game to win this weekend."

Concho's ancestors settled in Acoma Pueblo around 1150. They built their village on the mesa, 367 feet above the valley, positioned strategically to defend against raiders. (Presumably, not the ones from Oakland.)

The pueblo looks like a set for a Western movie. In fact, [John Wayne](#) made several films here. A Tim McGraw video and two Toyota commercials were also shot on the mesa.

Inside the church, which was built without nails but with beams carried 30 miles from Mount Taylor, the tour guide Fred Stevens carries a knit stocking cap with Romo's name stitched across the front.

He pointed to the oldest confessional and oldest classrooms in the United States, to the candles that spiral 25 feet up from the altar — red to represent their native religion, white to represent the Catholicism of the Spanish who enslaved the people here.

Outside the mission is a cemetery, measuring 400 feet by 400 feet, and 40 feet deep. The tribe prefers the term replanted, instead of buried, because members believe

they came from the earth and will eventually return to it. Humps of clay surround the cemetery, with eyes, noses and ears carved into them. They are soldiers guarding the dead.

The tribe has about 3,600 members, and 10 to 15 families live year-round in the pueblo. There is a matriarchal society. The women own the houses on the mesa, each inherited by the youngest daughter in a family.

The Acoma practice a religion heavy on song, ritual and ceremony. They grow corn, beans and squash in the valley below. They infuse pop-culture influences with Spanish, Mexican and Indian traditions.

The best example is the Cowboys, America's team, their favorite in all of football. And like anywhere else, the Cowboys inspire strong feelings.

"I hate them," said Gary Keene, another guide who lives on the pueblo. "Too many Cowboys fans around here. The only good thing to come out of Texas, in my opinion, was ZZ Top."

Everything in Acoma connects — the people and the traditions, the ancestors and the spirits, the animals and the plants and the soil. Even football.

Concho discovered the game in seventh grade. He played defensive tackle, fullback and middle linebacker in six seasons for the varsity.

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Before games, he painted stripes on his face, a red one from dark clay on top and a shiny purple stripe on bottom. This served as a blessing from a higher power, he said, and a reminder of his ancestors. It kept him healthy, kept him safe.

"I always wanted to be that warrior," said Concho, whose black hair is now flecked with gray. "Like the times when I used to think, What was it like back then? When we were fighting the Spanish and all that."

The Battle of Acoma started in 1598, when warriors killed 13 Spanish soldiers. The conquistador Juan de Oñate and 70 men retaliated by killing hundreds in the tribe. Gaspar Pérez de Villagrà described the battle in a poem, with its descriptions of the mangled dead, pierced flesh and quivering bodies.

After the three-day battle ended, de Oñate cut the feet off the remaining adult men and enslaved the entire pueblo. The history of Acoma is defined by this kind of tragedy and sadness. The people here learn of persecution, prosecution and genocide. A resiliency remains, born from traditions passed from one generation to the next.

Concho knows that resiliency, that sadness. He worked the graveyard shift in the nearby uranium mines for 20 years, 2,500 feet deep inside the shaft. He said he beat alcoholism, only to wake up 10 years ago with an unfathomable pain in his stomach.

Two of his siblings died from Hodgkin's disease, but tests and scans have revealed nothing so far. In his shrine, he keeps a Cowboys bag with his medication: the insulin for his diabetes, the morphine for his pain, the 20 pills he swallows every day.

Diabetes, alcoholism and the effects from the uranium mines are common on the reservation.

The pain subsides for a few hours most Sundays in the fall, when the Cowboys are on the satellite dish and Concho rests in his comfortable green easy chair.

"Sometimes I feel down about my illness and my stomach," he said. "I'm scared. But I always love the Cowboys. They are my favorite team."

With the energy he still has, Concho makes the intricate pottery that line shelves in his living room. He leads prayers. He writes songs performed on sacred holidays. He speaks in schools and wonders, he said, if children "really believe anymore."

He wants to ensure the traditions are passed on.

"Just like beating the drum, you know," Concho said. "Everything must be passed down."

Including this obsession with the Cowboys.

Tina Torivio, a 36-year-old tribe member, swears she has been a Dallas fan since birth. In high school, she dreamed of becoming a Cowboys cheerleader. On a trip to Dallas in 1983, she begged relatives to drive her around the empty stadium.

She watched games with her father before he died. Years later, she said, it feels as if he is sitting next to her, shouting in spirit at the television.

Children at school never understood. They used to ask Stevens, the guide, Shouldn't you like the [Redskins](#) or the [Chiefs](#)? "I didn't think Indians liked Cowboys," he said.

As the tour continued, Stevens pointed to huts where Cowboys fans live, to stands of pottery made by women who swoon over Romo. He told stories of catching people in cars during sacred ceremonies, listening to games. Of villagers bringing generators to the mesa to catch the Cowboys on TV. Of being unable to contain his excitement after the Cowboys won the Super Bowl and his boss sending him home

from work.

Of all the fans here, only Concho has made the pilgrimage of about 700 miles to Texas Stadium for a game. He went on Thanksgiving two years ago, with tickets from a friend, the former Cowboy and author Pat Toomay. [Sheryl Crow](#) sang the national anthem. [Broncos](#) cornerback Champ Bailey signed his book. Cowboys guard Larry Allen, his favorite player, stopped to talk.

"One of the best days of my life," Concho said.

On Wednesday, he rested on a bench at the scenic viewpoint. Several miles behind him, the casino continued to churn out the money with which the tribe built new schools and civic centers. Front and center, the old village rises in the distance, a postcard in sandstone.

Caught between these worlds, Concho stared in silence across the valley. His leather Cowboys jacket glistened in the sun.

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