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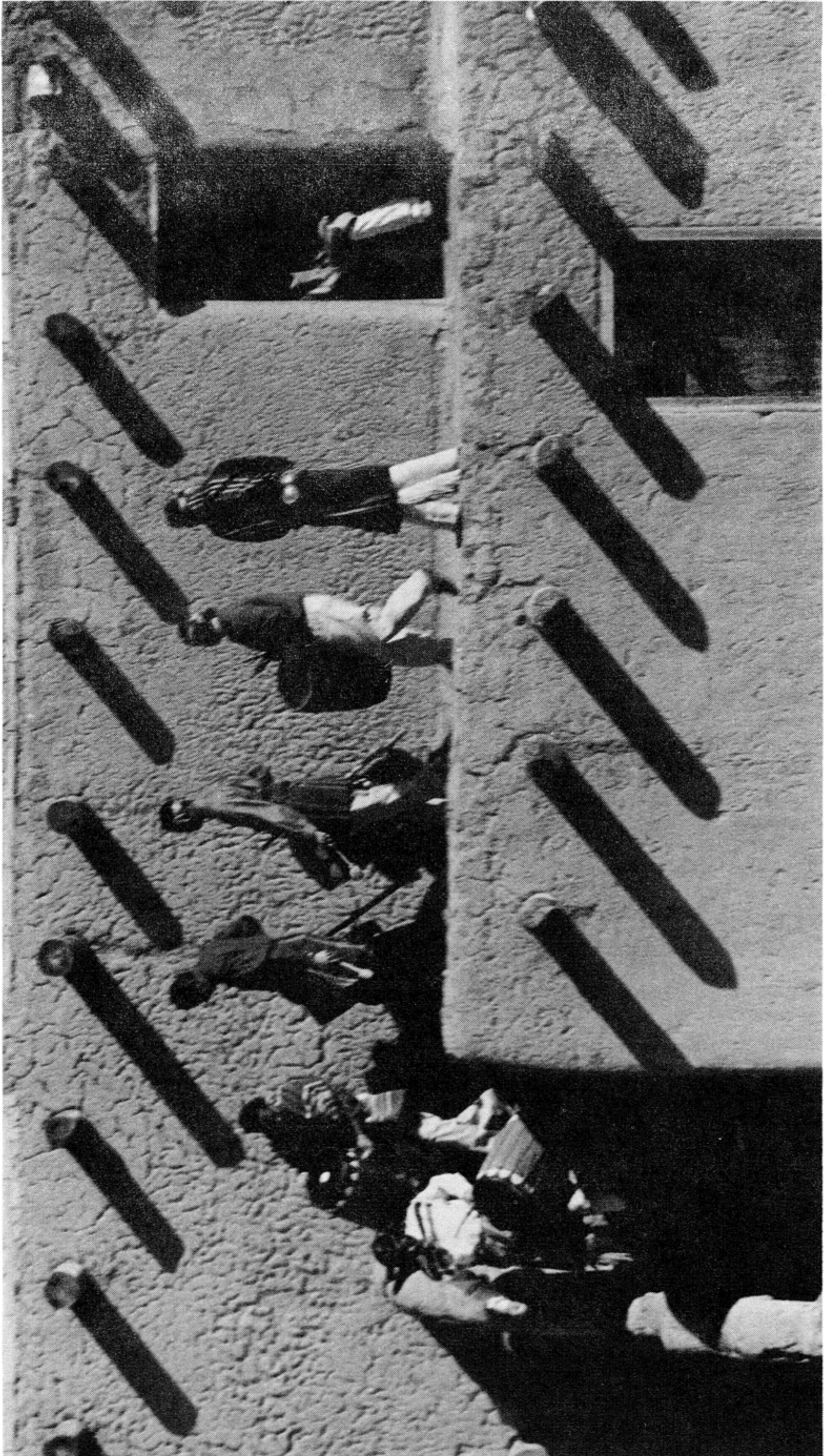


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Winter Feast at San Ildefonso (Courtesy of Roy Rosen)

Winter Feast at San Ildefonso

KARL YOUNG*

The thermometer stood at a chill fourteen degrees when I looked out of the bathroom window into the piñon forest at seven o'clock. But the sky was bright and bare, promising a sunny day, such as one grows to expect in Santa Fe. By the time we arrived at the pueblo, however, at about nine-thirty, the sun had paled in the face of a bitter wind that swirled dust around the plaza and kept people indoors near their piñon fires. So utterly deserted did the village seem that my heart fell down, as Adam Martinez, might say, for I thought we had missed the date, January twenty-third, the winter feast at San Ildefonso.

Not a sign of life appeared on the plaza, not a child, not a dog, not even a chicken. One ancient automobile was parked near Santana's house, like a derelict skiff stranded by the sea wall when the tide went out. But as we climbed stiffly out of the car, I heard a gunshot just beyond the first bank of houses. At once a flash of memory brought back the first ceremonial dance which we had seen at Cochiti. On arriving at the plaza we had been astonished to encounter two Indian men at the door of the little adobe church periodically firing old muskets while the mass was being sung by a German priest inside. We were told that these were guards who were frightening away evil spirits. Was the same device being employed here? I thought of this, encouraged, as we knocked at Santana's door.

Later, after we had visited with Santana and Maria, sitting in comfort before the fragrant piñon fire and laughing about the time when Maria had traded one of her lovely black pots to us for twenty-five varieties of iris way back in 1932—a pot which today would sell for more than a hundred dollars—we walked over to the scrubby little chapel in time to meet two priests leading a meager congregation on a brief procession around the plaza. They were giving Christian sanction to the pagan ceremony which had probably begun several days earlier in the kiva and was just this morning appearing in public. In the wake of the procession walked two youths with old army

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rifles, Mausers, I believe. Every so often they pointed these ancient guns at the heavens and banged away. They joked and laughed quietly at each other, evidently not taking the duty too seriously, though I presume that they would defend the practice solemnly were an outsider to hint that it was amusing.

As the procession came back, I saw that the makeshift church stood beside the ruins of a once-splendid adobe structure with massive walls and huge buttresses of native mud. The superb old church, I learned later, had been struck by a bolt of lightning, which so completely shattered one corner of the building that all of the walls were cracked and refused to support the huge old vigas, and the whole thing had been torn down. I could not help pondering what the Indians thought of their new Christian god when the old masculine god of lightning asserted his power this way.

Services were short in the chapel now, and the people soon filed out for what was to be a much more dramatic show. Almost at once the big *tombés* began to boom at the far end of the plaza, and we saw emerging from a building six handsome fellows, bare-headed and smooth-combed, each with a deep-voiced drum made from a cottonwood tree trunk. With slow dignity they walked across the plaza abreast, pounding on the great drums, and stood in a line singing in unison with their own deep voices a song which soon called forth from a nearby house a procession of great game animals. The procession was led by the buffaloes, two buffalo men and a buffalo maiden. The men carried gourd rattles in their right hands and a bow and three or four arrows in the left. Their heads were covered with huge, shaggy buffalo capes, which were crowned with thick, curving horns and dabbed with bits of white eagle down and a few fluttering eagle tail feathers, which gleamed white against the dark mass of the capes hanging down their backs.

The buffalo men moved with arched chests and raised forearms. They were erect and powerful, the monarchs of the prairie. Their gait was ponderous but impressive, a slow, rhythmic, bent-kneed trot. They dipped one horn occasionally, a gesture that probably symbolized the horning of the soft earth to make a buffalo wallow. It might also have represented an obeisance to one of the cardinal directions. The buffalo maiden moved sedately, modestly, between the bulls, keeping their rhythms and shadowing their movements. In each upraised hand she carried a pair of black-tipped eagle feathers, for the

eagle is a medicine bird of great powers and his plumes are important in the weaving of ceremonies.

Behind the massive, lumbering buffaloes a broken column of deer came stealing into the fearful openness of the plaza. Each dancer's head was crowned with stately antlers, tasseled with white eagle fluffs. The heads were upright, alert, constantly on the watch for danger, but the bodies were all bent forward, poised on a slender stick held in each hand, the strong, slim, front legs of swift runners, ready for flight. The deer stole along, froze, then stole forward again, keeping time with the drums, but at half tempo, gliding like spirits over the frozen ground.

And spirits they were. It was not until now that one noticed how all of the dancers' faces were painted black. Now one saw that the illusion of god-like animals in those splendid buffalo bulls was partly owing to the fact that the human faces were, in their blackness, almost indistinguishable beneath the heavy shadows of the overhanging capes. Even the breasts were black. And the hunter, who had actually led the procession, and who until now had not caught our attention, perhaps because he wore only a single feather in his hair and had no impressive crown of horns like the animals around and behind him, was a spirit hunter too. His painted face was a round black mask, incongruous, startling, above the traditional costume of fringed and beaded buckskin that one associates with the hunter of the prairie.

Behind them came a bouncing flock of mountain sheep, black-faced too, and thus allied to the spirit-buffalo and the spirit-deer, from whom they differed so markedly in their rollicking movements and temperament. And behind the sheep drifted a pair of antelope, yellow-backed and white-rumped, a slight little pair of wraiths compared to the burly buffalo that led the way. The size of these frail creatures carried one's imagination back to the kiva where the costumes had been donned. Here, surely, a couple of boys not yet at the age of puberty had wriggled into suits of long-handled winter underwear and, with the aid of paint, horned headdresses, and black-tipped, little white-haired tails, had been transformed miraculously into fleet and timid pronghorns.

The herd made its way in a weaving pattern across the plaza, bringing sustenance, the end of famine, all good things to all of the people in the village. Then gradually they assumed

a formation with long lines of dancers facing the drums and chorus. The rhythm changed, and while the deer, and sheep, and pronghorns, poised on the slim stick legs, beat with their feet a strong insistent appeal to the powers that send food, and health, and well-being, the buffalo performed their ritual dance.

With dignity and slow grace the huge bulls ambled over the prairie. With deep solemnity they bowed in the six cardinal directions, including earth and sky. With courage and pride the bulls threatened each other and fought over the favors of the buffalo maiden. With fright they wheeled and galloped away from the prancing hunter.

The song was finished. The rhythm of the drums shifted back again to the one we had known, and once more the herd moved, in its meandering pattern, with a winding, twisting indirectness, as though on the game trails which the animals themselves had made in the hills, back to the seclusion of the low adobe building from which they had emerged. The drums stopped throbbing, and the singers retired to a separate building, where they could warm their chilled limbs and wait for the ceremony on the other side of the pueblo to be presented in the south plaza.

Maria had told us, with a light in those artist's eyes of hers—eyes constantly on the watch for beauty—how the day had begun. The singers had walked abreast across the plaza, thumping their big drums and gazing off into the hills. They had stood in a line on the eastern edge of the village, singing their songs to call the deer and buffalo down out of the junipers into the pueblo, where women stood next to them in a half circle, waiting with little buckskin pouches of pollen or corn meal to sprinkle on the bare breasts of the dancers as they passed. Blessings were implicit as the sacred meal trickled from brown fingers. Blessings were given and received in that simple gesture. The heavens were clear, no wind blew, the air was almost warm—for a dawn in late January. But as the morning advanced, the brightness waned in the air. And the wind sprang up, blowing out of nowhere, round and round the plaza, sapping the strength of the winter sun.

In this raw north wind the dancers from the other side of the village had slipped out to form lines in the open fields opposite the hills from which the animals had come, stealing through the smoke of predawn fires to answer the call of the

voices and the drums. The dancers in these new lines looked even less like pueblo Indians than had the deer and buffalo, for the buffalo men wore painted yellow skirts on which undulating horned serpents created the bold design. And the deer dancers' slim waists were bound with girdles of white rain cloth, the long cords hanging directly down behind to swish and bob with every step of the dance, like slanting rain and glancing hail. Such features of costume are traditional in the pueblo country.

But the men in these new dance lines, which were now being formed on the edge of the village, wore Plains Indian headdresses, war bonnets of eagle tail feathers with dyed horse-hair tips. They had beaded arm bands, beaded belts, and beaded moccasins. And each of them carried a headless lance, a coup stick, from which hung a strip of bright flannel aflutter with hawk and eagle feathers. The men's bodies were bare, except for G-strings and, occasionally, a fringed and beaded vest. These were the Commanche dancers, commemorating in attire and movement, and with sharp, barking cries, the war parties from the Plains who used to come swooping down on the pueblos to raid, and plunder, and carry off the pueblo women.

It seemed ironic that the enemies of the people should be represented with such handsome costumes and so much animation in the dance. And it was, to us at least, a further irony that little pueblo maidens, in wide white pueblo boots, full skirts, blouses, and scarves, danced behind these naked braves, not, to be sure, as captives, but with the joy of participation in a favorite pueblo ceremony. How short is memory! How fleeting, pain!

From out on the edge of the fields the drums began to boom and the chanting of deep male voices rose above the wind. The Commanches—probably a generic term for any or all of those raiders from the Great Plains—were coming in across the flat lands, as they had no doubt done for ages. In two columns they came, the lines crossing each other, back and forth, in a highly formalized representation of individual combat with spear and shield. The warriors faced each other, sifted through, turned about, and faced each other again. No quick and ugly gestures, no thrusting and jerking of weapons. Smoothly, softly, the lines flowed through each other.

The naked bodies glided in a slow-measured running walk, keeping time with the pulsing tombés. Only the barks and

cries, thin and dry, like weird bird calls, broke erratically through the rhythm of the chorus and the dance. Those cries clashed against the cadence of the singing but could not break it. They woke the atavisms which were slumbering beneath the smooth patterns of the dance. They stirred a chill in the breast, but could not evoke a shudder.

The throbbing columns reached the south plaza, rounded the big centrally placed kiva, and took positions before the houses on the north. There the rhythms changed, and with them the steps of the dance. Now it was a controlled war dance, with the quick step of the stylized buffalo-pawing, but not like the war dance really, for everything was in unison. The dancers all turned right, turned left, advanced, and retreated in unison. And now a new pattern developed, with the lead men weaving their way down through the columns in a sort of double grand-right-and-left until they had worked through the whole length of the lines.

The wind blew harder, and relentlessly harder, until some of the big eagle plume war bonnets turned inside out and stayed anchored only by the thongs under the dancers' chins. One tall warrior had painted the whole left side of his body a bright blue and the right side bright yellow. His legs were bare from G-string to moccasins, and his trunk from belt to braids. The blue side of his body could not get any bluer, but we half expected the yellow side to turn green. Spectators in alpaca-lined coats returned to their cars and heaters to get warm, but the naked dancers danced on. It was almost a relief to see them turn their lines at last and slowly weave the threads of the dance up to the door of a long, low house and go inside.

By turns the dance groups appeared and repeated their dance in their separate plazas. We could not stay for the finish. We went back to our friends' house and ate from loaded tables: piping hot stew with home-grown chilis, *pasole* with high-flavored sauce, crunchy white bread baked in the outside clay ovens, pudding, sweet with raisins and peaches, and the inevitable great pots of coffee. The table was always full, though I would wager that the hosts could not always name the guests who sat there. I do not know how much food was prepared, but I remembered when old Mr. Lucero at the Jemez Feast Day on one November twelfth butchered twelve sheep in order to feed the hungry Navajos who flocked in for the occasion. How often this was repeated in the pueblo is anybody's guess, as

WINTER FEAST AT SAN ILDEFONSO

99

every house was open to any visitor who would enter and eat. It is the Indian way.

As we drove home the sun grew warm and the wind died. Perhaps it had blown itself out in a vain effort to blast the Feast Day at San Ildefonso.