

**Penitentes**

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At one point my historical fiction, *Hill’s Gold,* reached 450 pages. There was so much interesting background material in the mid-1860s it was hard to resist including it all. Eventually, I realized I had to trim and the Penitentes was one of the topics that ended up on the cutting room floor.

I had read that there were Penitentes in the Sangre de Cristo Valley so it would not be too far-fetched to imagine that Nathaniel Hill might have come across them. The Penitente Brotherhood traces its roots to 11th century Europe where an unofficial group of men sought to rid their sins through abstinence, fasting, kneeling, and even self- flagellation (whipping themselves). The most zealous even practiced flagellation in public processions to atone for their wrongdoings. The Catholic Church generally tolerated them until the 14th century when it banned the brotherhood as a cult, sending *los penitentes* underground,



When Mexico gained independence from Spain in 1821, it removed the Franciscan, Jesuit, and Dominican missionaries from all its provinces, replacing them with secular priests. The number of priests appointed was insufficient to provide secluded communities with a resident clergyman. Some rural areas could expect only an annual visit from a parish priest. Local worshipers, some secret Penitente Brotherhood, filled the void by banding together to provide charity and mutual aid in the spirit of penance to sparsely settled communities. There were often processions during Holy Week and in some even the ritual of flagellation.

In my bloated draft of *Hill’s Gold* I had Nathaniel leaving Posthoff’s Fort to explore the area while Gilpin and his expedition searched for mineral samples. Posthoff worried about Nathaniel’s solitary jaunts, but one day agreed to lend him a horse so he could travel farther afield. On that day Nathaniel came across a quartet of men constructing a timbered building while singing as they worked. He stopped to watch and offered the men the loaf of bread he had brought in his saddlebag. They accepted with appreciative gestures, but Nathaniel could not understand their Spanish.

When he returned to the fort, he sought out Amidor Sanchez, the only English-speaking resident and explained what he had seen. Amidor answered hesitantly, eyes toward the ground as he explained that the men were most likely building a *morado* or meeting house for ceremonies. That they were a band of men who helped the poor by providing for funerals and other needs. Most likely their singing was *alabados,* songs of worship, but Amador never mentioned the ritual of flagellation. He shook his head nervously and cautioned Nathaniel not to mention what he had seen to others. “It is a secret of the community.”

The numbers of *Penitentes* has decreased dramatically throughout Europe and the Southwest United States, but even today there are those who clandestinely observe personal penance through acts of charity and even flagellation.

Ellen