History of the Tierra Amarilla Grant, northern New Mexico

Charles Butler, 1977, pp. 91-92

in:

This is one of many related papers that were included in the 1977 NMGS Fall Field Conference Guidebook.

Annual NMGS Fall Field Conference Guidebooks

Every fall since 1950, the New Mexico Geological Society (NMGS) has held an annual Fall Field Conference that explores some region of New Mexico (or surrounding states). Always well attended, these conferences provide a guidebook to participants. Besides detailed road logs, the guidebooks contain many well written, edited, and peer-reviewed geoscience papers. These books have set the national standard for geologic guidebooks and are an essential geologic reference for anyone working in or around New Mexico.

Free Downloads

NMGS has decided to make peer-reviewed papers from our Fall Field Conference guidebooks available for free download. Non-members will have access to guidebook papers two years after publication. Members have access to all papers. This is in keeping with our mission of promoting interest, research, and cooperation regarding geology in New Mexico. However, guidebook sales represent a significant proportion of our operating budget. Therefore, only research papers are available for download. Road logs, mini-papers, maps, stratigraphic charts, and other selected content are available only in the printed guidebooks.

Copyright Information

Publications of the New Mexico Geological Society, printed and electronic, are protected by the copyright laws of the United States. No material from the NMGS website, or printed and electronic publications, may be reprinted or redistributed without NMGS permission. Contact us for permission to reprint portions of any of our publications.

One printed copy of any materials from the NMGS website or our print and electronic publications may be made for individual use without our permission. Teachers and students may make unlimited copies for educational use. Any other use of these materials requires explicit permission.
This page is intentionally left blank to maintain order of facing pages.
INTRODUCTION

Life moves slowly in Tierra Amarilla. Although the Court- 
house has a new coat of paint and the general store is open,
the old business district consists mostly of deserted and
 crumbling adobe buildings.

This is "Alianza country." During the 1960's, a political
movement was organized by Reies Tijerina to obtain redress
for purported injustices with respect to federal and private
lands in north-central New Mexico.

The issues are complex and inflammatory. The basic com-
plaint is that lands which once belonged to the Mexican-
American populace were taken from them through designation
of National Forests and fraudulent acquisition of Spanish and
Mexican land grants by 19th-century Anglo land barons.

The Alianza movement reached its peak on June 5, 1967,
when the Rio Arriba County Courthouse in Tierra Amarilla
was raided by a group of Tijerina supporters. Two deputies
were wounded in the raid, and one man was killed in later
related feuding. Tijerina eventually served a term in jail for
his part in organizing the raid.

Although the Alianza movement has now quieted down,
periodic incidents of violence and talk of "land takeover" per-
sist to the present time. Obviously the basic complaints—
real or imagined—remain in the hearts and minds of many of
the region's Mexican-American inhabitants.

EARLY HISTORY

The Tierra Amarilla Grant consists of about 600,000 acres
in Rio Arriba County, New Mexico and Archuleta County,
Colorado (fig. 1). Control of the area passed from Spain to
Mexico in the early 1800's, and then to the United States in
1848 by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. This treaty recog-
nized previous land grants from Spain and Mexico, including
the Tierra Amarilla Grant of 1832 to Manuel Martinez. Manuel
died in 1844 and his land rights passed to his son Francisco.
Upon petition by Francisco, the Grant was confirmed by an
Act of Congress in 1860 and a U.S. patent was issued in 1881.

Subsequent land transfers were numerous and complex, but
suffice it to say that by 1894 a Santa Fe lawyer and political
leader named Thomas Catron owned two million acres and was
part owner or attorney for an additional four million acres in
New Mexico. The Tierra Amarilla Grant was part of his vast
holdings and was deeded to a family venture known as the
U.S. Land and Colonization Company in 1883. Title sub-
sequently passed to Thomas' son Charles in 1901.

During the period of Catron family control, various popula-
tion centers such as Chama, Tierra Amarilla and El Vado were
platted and developed; a lumber industry was established; and
railroads were built in the northern and western sectors.
Charles Catron transferred all but the developed portions
of the Grant (known as "Catron's Exclusions") to the Chama
Valley Land Company in 1909. Two months later title passed
to the Arlington Land Company, and effective control became
vested in a group of midwestern developers and financiers
which included John E. Andrus, Samuel S. Thorpe and others.

MINERAL RIGHTS

During the period 1912-1922, the Arlington Land Company
divested itself of most of its Grant lands. Mineral rights were
severed from large tracts in the eastern and southern portions
of the Grant by virtue of a series of deeds from Arlington to
the Mosota Land Company. These deeds conveyed not only
mineral rights, but also rights of access and development and
rights to repurchase proven mineral lands for $10.00 per acre.

The mineral rights acquired by Mosota were subsequently
transferred to James R. Thorpe of Minneapolis in 1937, to the
Andyck Corporation in 1942, and finally to the U.S. Trust
Company of New York and others in 1950. This last transfer
established a trusteeship under the will of John E. Andrus,
which now administers the mineral rights on behalf of about
150 heirs of the original principals of the Arlington and
Mosota companies.

MINERAL EXPLORATION

Although a few oil and gas tests have been drilled within the
Grant, no significant production has been discovered to date in
the New Mexico portion. The Gramps and Chromo oil fields
in Archuleta County, Colorado, are partially within the grant.
Uranium exploration was conducted on portions of the Grant during the 1967-1976 period by Atlantic-Richfield, Ranchers Exploration and Development Corporation and others.

CONCLUSION
The Tierra Amarilla Grant is a land of many paradoxes: a land of large, prosperous ranches but small, poor communities; a land of varied natural resources but limited development; a spectacularly beautiful land but a land of sorrow and bitterness. A better understanding of the past will hopefully contribute to a brighter future.