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History of the Tierra Amarilla Grant, northern New Mexico

Charles Butler, 1977, pp. 91-92

in:

San Juan Basin III (northwestern New Mexico), Fassett, J. F.; James, H. L.; [eds.], New Mexico Geological Society 28th Annual Fall Field Conference Guidebook, 319 p.

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HISTORY OF THE TIERRA AMARILLA GRANT

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INTRODUCTION

Life moves slowly in Tierra Amarilla. Although the Courthouse 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 complaint 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" persist 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 recognized 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 subsequently passed to Thomas' son Charles in 1901.

During the period of Catron family control, various population 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.

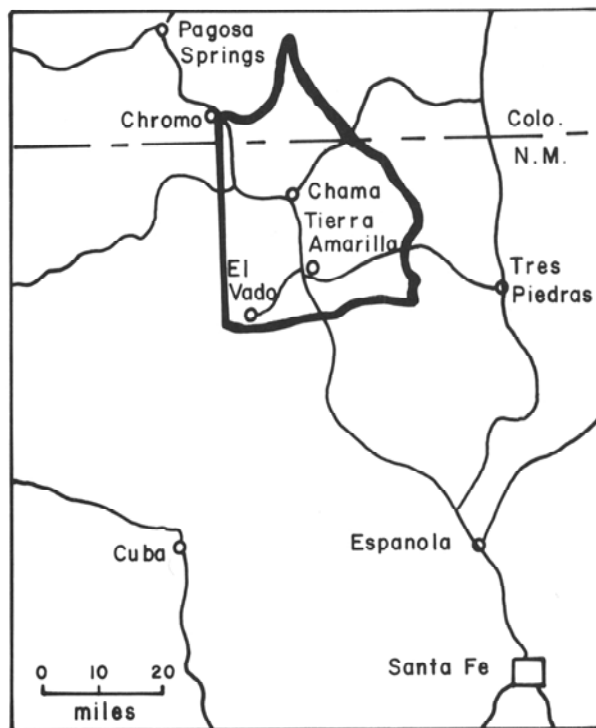


Figure 1. Index map of Tierra Amarilla Grant.

The Arlington Land Company had grandiose plans for the development of a network of reservoirs, irrigation systems and water-power systems throughout the Grant area. Various deeds from Arlington still reserve the right to take and use lands for these purposes.

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.