Spring 1-1-2013

(Re)Making the Valley? A Century of Community, Agriculture And Irrigation In New Mexico’s Mesilla Valley

Steven Christopher Baker
University of Colorado at Boulder, schrisbaker@comcast.net

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.colorado.edu/hist_gradetds
Part of the Latin American History Commons, and the United States History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://scholar.colorado.edu/hist_gradetds/20
(RE)MAKING THE VALLEY? A CENTURY OF COMMUNITY, AGRICULTURE AND IRRIGATION IN NEW MEXICO’S MESILLA VALLEY

by

Steven C. Baker

B.A., Texas Tech University, 1994

M.A., New Mexico State University, 2000

A thesis submitted to the
Faculty of the Graduate School of the
University of Colorado in partial fulfillment
Of the requirement for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Department of History
2013
This dissertation entitled:
(Re)Making The Valley? A Century Of Community, Agriculture And Irrigation In New Mexico’s Mesilla Valley
Written by
Steven C. Baker
Has been approved fro the Department of History

_______________________________
Ralph Mann

_______________________________
Phoebe S. K. Young

_______________________________
Paul Sutter

Date_______________

The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.
Baker, Steven C. (Ph.D, History)

(Re)Making The Valley? A Century Of Community, Agriculture And Irrigation In New Mexico’s Mesilla Valley

Thesis directed by Associate Professor Ralph Mann

This dissertation is a social and environmental history of the communities of the Mesilla Valley from their initial founding in 1843 until the 1930s. The Valley, which straddles the Rio Grande in southern New Mexico, was first settled under Mexican land grants in the 1840s. Water and irrigation provided the agricultural foundation of the fledgling Hispanic communities such as Doña Ana, Las Cruces, and Mesilla. New Non-Hispanic settlers began arriving in the 1860s. Instead of imposing their values upon the established communities, they integrated themselves into the dominant Hispanic culture and even adopted varying degrees of Mexican national identity, even though the region was, after 1854, part of the United States. Traditions of interethnic interaction continued to shape life in the Mesilla Valley for decades.

The very survival of the Mesilla Valley settlements was threatened by a man-made drought in the late 1800s. Development in Colorado dramatically reduced the flow of the Rio Grande making farming untenable in the Mesilla Valley. Eventually, in 1905, the United States Congress approved the Rio Grande Project, a federal reclamation project, which provided for the development of an extensive irrigation infrastructure to ensure a dependable supply of water to the Mesilla Valley. The Rio Grande Project did not just bring water to the valley. It brought dramatic
transformations in which local traditions of social interaction and water management interacted with the changes and ideological predispositions brought by federal engineers. Mesilla Valley residents did not shun the market or modern irrigation, but they did not wholeheartedly embrace the federal reclamation at the expense of established practice. Ultimately, local practice and custom mediated federal power.
To Marene, as always.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The historian’s craft is often solitary, but it is not an exercise done without help. Many people and institutions have contributed to this dissertation, materially and intellectually. First, I would like to thank the History Department and the Graduate School at the University of Colorado at Boulder for their financial support, especially the Graduate School Dissertation Fellowship and the Charles Middleton Research Fellowship.

Scott Miller, in the history department, has provided invaluable assistance in managing the administrative requirements that shape the life of a graduate student. His virtuosity should not be ignored and I am certain he has made my studies smoother than even I realize.

I have been lucky to have the assistance of several knowledgeable archivists and librarians. The staff and students at the Rio Grande Historical Collections in Las Cruces, the staff at the New Mexico State Archives, the archivists at still photos branch of the National Archives and Records Administration in College Park, Maryland, and the archivists at the National Archives and Records Administration in Denver all provided guidance, searched out records, sent me in new directions when I needed some prodding, and even made copies for me on occasion. It is all greatly appreciated. This project would have been much more difficult without their knowledge and enthusiasm.

This dissertation was also shaped by the intellectual stimulation provided by conversations among colleagues and fellow graduate students including Ray Sadler, Stan Hordes, Jim Muhn, Colin Church, Nathan Matlock, Michael Weeks, Paul
Langston, Doug Sheflin, and Marty Babicz. Several faculty members crossed my path at the University of Colorado and they all contributed to the dissertation in their own ways. This was especially true for Julie Greene, Brian Delay, Francisco Barbosa, Peter Boag, and Marcia Yonemoto. I am also fortunate to have a committee replete with inquisitive scholars and admirable individuals. Ralph Mann, Phoebe S.K. Young, Paul Sutter, Bob Ferry, and Greg Johnson all helped shape this dissertation.

Finally, none of this would have been possible without the contributions of my family. Marene, my wife, always willingly acted as a sounding board, confidant, editor, archivist, and companion as I wrestled with the complexities of history, water, and community in southern New Mexico. My children, Varick and Samantha, kept me from taking myself too seriously and motivated me to keep plugging away.

Thank you all.
CONTENTS

Introduction .................................................................................................................. 1

Chapter I: River and Road: Settling the Mesilla Valley, 1840-1880 .......................... 25

Chapter 2: The Valley in Crisis ................................................................................. 76

Chapter 3: Contours of Resistance, Reform, and Progress ..................................... 114

Chapter 4: Reclamation ............................................................................................ 150

Chapter 5: Change Comes to the Valley: Land 1905-1930 ..................................... 189

Chapter 6: Ditches and Devastation: Water: 1905-1930 ........................................ 228

Chapter 7: Change and Continuity: Agriculture and Community 1905-1930 ...... 265

Conclusion: The Resiliency of Local Practice ............................................................ 289

Bibliography ............................................................................................................... 306
Maps:

Map 1: Location of the Mesilla Valley in New Mexico .............................................. 24

Map 2: Hispanic Land Grants: Northern Half of the Mesilla Valley ......................... 73

Map 3: Hispanic Land Grants: Southern Half of the Mesilla Valley .......................... 74

Map 4: Mesilla Valley Communities ........................................................................ 75

Figures:

Figure 1: “Irrigated Farming in the Mesilla Valley,” Ca. 1896 ............................. 184

Figure 2: Farm with Adobe Structures in Background, 1904 ............................. 185

Figure 3: Old Chamberino Church and Fields, Ca. 1904 .................................. 186

Figure 4: “Typical N.M. Home in the Mesilla Valley,” 1908 ............................. 187

Figure 5: “Typical Mexican Farm Home,” 1908 .............................................. 188

Figure 6: “Seepage Lake Near La Mesa Before Drainage,” 1918 ....................... 251

Figure 7: “Rio Grande: A Typical Home on the Rio Grande Project,” 1933 ......... 303
Introduction

Water and community have always been inexorably linked in the southwestern United States. Many settlements relied on a dependable supply of irrigation water for their survival. This was often a precarious arrangement. Residents and their ditches were at the mercy of unpredictable rivers. When the rivers flooded, shifted course, or ceased to flow, they put entire communities in peril. This was exactly the position that residents along the Rio Grande south of Albuquerque found themselves in at the end of the nineteenth century. Problems were especially acute in the Mesilla Valley, which spans about fifty-five miles from Seldon Canyon near Radium Springs, New Mexico, to a gorge near Mount Cristo Rey west of El Paso, Texas. The valley was also one of the most promising agricultural regions in New Mexico. Here the river alternated between flood and dust in good times. Times were not good by the end of the century and there was mostly just dust.

While crops and communities struggled in the Mesilla Valley, a national movement was coalescing. A group of reformers, scientists, engineers, promoters, and politicians argued that the development of the West and, for some, the redemption of the nation depended upon modern irrigation development that minimized the capriciousness of western rivers and opened more land to cultivation and settlement. These were expensive ideas. Private irrigation schemes were common, but it quickly became clear that if modern large-scale irrigation was to become a reality, it would be at the behest of the federal government. The Newlands Act of 1902 and the establishment of the Reclamation Service (later Bureau of Reclamation) a few years later provided the impetus for this new federal role in the West.
Southern New Mexico’s Mesilla Valley was not immune to these movements. The United States Geologic Survey began conducting hydrologic surveys in the region in the 1880s. At the same time, privately funded development companies formulated plans for dams and diversions along the Rio Grande to serve the Mesilla Valley. Eventually, in 1905, the United States government approved the Rio Grande Project, which provided for the construction of Elephant Butte Reservoir and the development of an extensive irrigation infrastructure to ensure a dependable supply of water to the Mesilla Valley. The reclamation project did not just bring water to the valley. It brought change, both positive and negative.

This dissertation reveals how the federal water development project perpetuated change in a region largely settled by Hispanic small farmers. Indeed, the development of modern irrigation in New Mexico’s southern Rio Grande Valley represented a dramatic federal incursion into a rural region with longstanding traditions of interethnic interaction and democratic water management. The Rio Grande Project facilitated vast transformations in regional economy, politics, and culture. The transformations, however, were incomplete. The Mesilla Valley never reflected the hopes and ideals of engineers and bureaucrats. Anglo dominance certainly increased, especially in relation to the control of water, but spatial and social segregation was more elusive. Reclamation engineers did not create new settlements populated by prosperous white farmers. Established communities with their own histories of interethnic interaction and regional integration dominated the Rio Grande project. This is not to say that class, racial and ethnic tension did not exist, or that non-Hispanics did not become more powerful at the expense of the Hispanic population. These characteristics all affected life in the Mesilla Valley. This dissertation,
however, focuses on the important ways that interaction and tradition served to preserve established community structures and practices, even as they evolved under the influence of the Reclamation Service. I specifically explore how federal reclamation affected land tenure, local water management, and agriculture.

Early settlement in the Mesilla Valley was facilitated by several Mexican land grants, beginning with the Dona Ana Bend Colony, which was created in 1843. The early years of the grant were precarious, but by 1848 the original settlers had gained legal title to their allotments. This grant grew to include the communities of Dona Ana and Las Cruces, east of the Rio Grande (which became United States Territory in 1848). The Mexican government continued to make grants of land west of the river after the end of the United States-Mexican War in 1848. These included the Mesilla Civil Colony, Refugio Civil Colony, and Santo Tomas y Iturbide grants.¹

One of the first actions taken by settlers was the construction of irrigation systems. These consisted of a community owned primary ditch, *Acequia Madre*, with smaller feeder ditches constructed to serve individual plots. Water management and ditch maintenance was a communal affair. The *mayordomo*, an elected official, oversaw water allocation and

ditch repairs. Small farmers often paid for their water by providing labor in maintaining the irrigation system. This regime was the regional norm into the 1900s.²

By the 1880s, the two most notable communities in New Mexico’s southern Rio Grande valley were Las Cruces and Mesilla, with several small farming villages to the north and south along both sides of the river.³ The towns served as regional social, political, and economic centers supporting a small scale farm economy.⁴ A quantitative analysis of agriculture in the region revealed that in 1890 there were 275 farmers irrigating 11,051


acres in the Mesilla and Rincon Valleys (Dona Ana County).\textsuperscript{5} Average farm size was 40 acres, slightly above the state average. Farmers grew fruit, grain, and vegetables. Some farmers supplemented their incomes with wage labor.\textsuperscript{6}

The region was in crisis by the 1890s. Water development in southern Colorado and northern New Mexico significantly curtailed the Rio Grande’s natural flow and, beginning in the late 1880s and intensifying in the 1890s, the river often ran dry before it reached the Hispanic villages of southern New Mexico. Many previously cultivated acres remained fallow.

The water crisis spearheaded a federal intrusion into the Southern New Mexico that attempted to remake the valley into a modern rural paradise. Proponents of modern irrigation wanted to use science to bring irrigable lands under efficient use. They also saw large irrigation projects as a tool for social and family reform. In their view, individual (ideally white) farmers and families who had emigrated from overcrowded cities would settle small plots of reclaimed land. This, in turn, would create new markets for eastern business and railroads. Proponents also saw reclamation as a salve for speculation. They believed that the high land costs associated with irrigation projects would discourage

\textsuperscript{5} This was almost 5,000 acres more than any other New Mexico county along the Rio Grande. See F.H. Newell, “Agriculture-Irrigation in New Mexico,” \textit{Census Bulletin}, No. 60, (April 30, 1891): Pg. 3.

\textsuperscript{6} Newell, “Agriculture-Irrigation ,” Pg. 5.
speculators and encourage cooperative agricultural communities of individual farmers who practiced intensive farming.\textsuperscript{7}

Local support of federal reclamation was widespread. As early as the 1880s, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic elites were arguing for reclamation to rescue the farmers of the Mesilla Valley from the effects of upriver development. Local farmers were not opposed to adopting modern innovation or accepting outside influence. Many of the valley’s Hispanic farmers accepted federal reclamation and the renovation of community ditches as long as their water rights were protected.\textsuperscript{8}

However, reclamation did not just bring engineered ditches; it was the vanguard of an ambivalent modernizing ideology in which traditional Hispanic farmers had little presence. Engineers, boosters, and reformers had difficulty reconciling Hispanic farmers and modernity. They saw a future in which hard working non-Hispanic white farmers would put the land to good use. Hispanics were relegated to an inefficient past or were seen as dutiful laborers.\textsuperscript{9} In 1890, F. H. Newell argued that the agricultural crisis in the


\textsuperscript{8} Wozniak, “Irrigation in the Rio Grande Valley,” Pg. 91.

valley was partly attributable to race. This rhetoric continued into at least the 1930s. Hispanics, however, never went away.

The irrigation discourse was not merely tied to race. In fact, from the beginning federal reclamation was a contradictory enterprise. As true Progressives, proponents of reclamation held conflicting views that venerated tradition on one hand and modernity on the other. For example, they wanted to encourage small farming, rural community, and independence from agribusiness, but wholeheartedly supported the cultivation of cotton as a cash crop and the mechanization of farming.

Ultimately, the Mesilla Valley communities met the challenges of irrigation, drought and federal reclamation through resistance, accommodation, and innovation in a manner that allowed for cultural pluralism and some political interaction. These historical realities are reflected in a wealth of documentary evidence revealing the history of reclamation and community in the Mesilla Valley. The following archival, oral history, and newspaper collections provided the bulk of material illuminating the development of modern irrigation in New Mexico’s southern Rio Grande Valley.

The Records of the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR) clearly illuminate the ambiguity of reclamation policy and the racial views that shaped the manner in which engineers understood the Mesilla Valley. They show that officials were convinced that reclamation would save the small farms of the Mesilla Valley by modernizing agriculture and attracting white settlement. Most of the reclamation engineers consigned the local Hispanic

population to an insignificant primitive past. Finally, the records provide data on agriculture, land holding, immigration, labor, and social conditions and are, thus, important for charting change in the valley. In addition to voluminous files of correspondence and reports, the records include a large number of photographs that provide perspectives on the valley that are not reflected in the documents.

Another important collection is that of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID), which serves two important roles. First, they round out any gaps in the BOR records. Second, they illuminate local agency in the face of federal reclamation and show how local residents interacted with federal engineers through their locally elected irrigation district officials.

The EBID and BOR records are supplemented by other collections that provide insight into individuals and families who were active in the local community and/or the development of modern irrigation and agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. One of the most important of these collections are the papers of Fabian Garcia. An immigrant from Mexico, Garcia was an agriculture and horticulture professor at New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (New Mexico State University) and eventually became director of the local Agricultural Experiment Station during the years this dissertation covers. He was also active in the Alianza Hispano-Americana, an organization led by prominent Hispanics that served to protect Hispanic residents and preserve Mexican culture. Garcia’s records reveal the prospective of a Hispanic Progressive who was intimately linked to agriculture in the valley. The collection consists of personal and professional records. Document types include correspondence, speeches, photographs, notes, and financial materials.
A collection of oral histories that the New Mexico Farm and Ranch Heritage Museum (Las Cruces, New Mexico) has been collecting since the mid-1990s illuminates the ways regular residents lived their lives. They reveal everything from the type of house in which one lived to the ways farms were worked. The oral histories also show that residents sometimes supplemented their farm income through wage labor. Finally, they provide important information on the ways in which different ethnic groups interacted, or did not interact. Of particular note is the fact that the interviews are diverse. Male and females residents of Hispanic, Anglo, and Japanese heritage are represented. The interviewees also come from various socioeconomic backgrounds from immigrant migrant labors to developers of commercial agriculture. The oral histories provide a perspective of daily life that is often not represented by the documentary evidence.

Finally, several Spanish and English language newspapers were published in the Mesilla Valley throughout the period this dissertation addresses. The newspaper editorials and letters reflect the political and social perspectives of their editors and constituents and describe the ways local leaders and readers interpreted local events. Newspapers also provide a valuable window into community and change. They contain announcements of events (enchilada dinners, festivals, fairs) meetings (especially ditch associations) new businesses (flour mills, restaurants, canneries) a wealth of advertisements, and print articles celebrating and criticizing local conditions. Finally, the newspapers are a window into local modes of interaction.

The arguments presented in this dissertation hinge on understanding those places where interethnic interaction occurred in the Mesilla Valley because such an approach
allows me to explore the ways in which continuity and change interacted side by side. The reader should not, however, take this emphasis to mean that ethnic conflict and racism did not exist in the Mesilla Valley. It certainly did, especially by the 1900s, but the areas interaction are more important in explaining social and cultural resilience in the Mesilla Valley than are areas of exclusion and division.

The chronological framework of this dissertation spans from 1843 to the 1930s for five reasons. First, the settlement of project lands was essentially complete by the 1930s. Therefore any demographic changes triggered by federal reclamation were apparent by then. Second, the local ditches had all come under Reclamation Service control by the late 1920s establishing a federally influenced water management regime. Third, agricultural changes affected by reclamation were well established by the 1930s. Fourth, the last major construction on the Rio Grande Project, the Caballo Dam was completed in 1934. Fifth, the Bureau of Reclamation, by the 1930s, shifted from an agency ostensibly focused on remaking men and communities to an agency more often associated with major dam projects, such as Hoover Dam, that were wildly ambitious and more directly tied to corporate and urban interests. Ultimately, the Rio Grande Project was well established in the Mesilla Valley by the 1930s and any trends that continued in subsequent decades had been initiated. The Bureau of Reclamation, on the other hand, shifted its ideological focus away from reform to development by the 1930s.

Histories of multicultural regions, such as Southwestern United States, are replete with lexical challenges. The identification of the various racial, ethnic, and national groups that populate such histories can easily become unwieldy without some sort of systematic
approach. This dissertation is no different. The two terms I use most regularly are the broadly conceptualized, Hispanic and non-Hispanic. Hispanic is applied to any person or group whose ethnicity is predominantly of Latin America, usually Mexico. Non-Hispanic encapsulates any other ethnicity or group. I occasionally use Anglo (and Anglo American) to more specifically denote individuals and groups of predominantly English heritage. American and Mexican are used to denote national identity, except in direct quotes where the authors used the term to mean ethnic Mexican or ethnic Anglo-American. Finally Americanized is used to describe individuals and communities that reflect non-Hispanic values in the views of contemporary observers.

The history of irrigation and community in the Mesilla Valley as presented in this dissertation is a micro-history that is conversant with arguments and themes addressed by social history and environmental history. My work contributes to social history scholarship on communities and ethnic groups that illuminates the ways in which residents responded to, and shaped, changes represented by federal power. The dissertation also contributes to histories that address water management, especially prior to World War II, a topic that is inherently environmental.

The historiography of federal water development and management is dominated by two interpretations that note the dramatic changes reclamation brought to communities, but differ in their understanding of the ways in which local residents were able to shape or resist federal policy and action. Donald Worster notes that water development has been considerably undemocratic and that local citizens had little control over the management of water. In Rivers of Empire he argues that powerful elites and federal bureaucrats allied
themselves and came to dominate communities through the management of water.\textsuperscript{11} Worster’s analysis which envisions reclamation as a movement leading to the post-World War II era of big dams and agribusiness leaves little room for local conditions that might complicate the primacy of elite interests. Donald J. Pisani sees more nuance. He argues that water development was the product of competition and factionalism on both local and national levels, especially in the period before World War II. In this environment, the Bureau of Reclamation had no choice but to accommodate local interests.\textsuperscript{12}

Another important component of reclamation historiography addresses the ideological values that drove federal reclamation. Donald Worster asserts that, regardless of rhetoric, irrigation was irrevocably linked to corporate power and control.\textsuperscript{13} Pisani argues that, initially, federal reclamation was an idealistic enterprise in which progressive engineers hoped to use science to reform society by making nature efficient. However, by the 1920s social reform gave way to economic development under the guise of science. He stresses that the ambiguity of reclamation policy between 1902 and 1935 was continually shaped by a conflict between the preservation the small yeoman farm and the development of modern capitalistic farming.\textsuperscript{14} This is well reflected in the Mesilla Valley.

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{13} Worster, \textit{Rivers of Empire}, Pgs. 124-5.
\end{flushright}

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{14} Pisani, \textit{Water and American Government}, Pgs. xvi, 13, 21, 32, 272-3.
\end{flushright}
Worster’s and Pisani’s studies also contain ecological dimensions. In Worster’s analysis reclamation led to a condition in which powerful elite with the means to deploy vast capital gained control water. Irrigation became a tool for the accumulation of wealth, which precipitated extensive ecological degradation and instability. Worster argues that a partial salve to this condition is the democratization of agriculture and the dispersal of power. He believes that independent farmers and small farms can bring some ecological balance to irrigated farming.15

Pisani agrees with Worster that reclamation fundamentally altered Western rivers. He, however, sees the history of reclamation and environment as one with discrete phases. For the period prior to World War II, Pisani notes that early reclamation projects lacked finances, technology, or centralized control to dominate nature in the ways Worster envisions. Moreover, federal reclamation officials were conservationists who hoped to rationalize nature and make it serve democratic means. The failure of the democratization of agriculture became evident in the 1920s when policy shifted from creating settlements and managing water in a local context to economic development across vast regions. This led to much larger reclamation projects by the 1930s, such as Hoover Dam, that had the ability to make rivers “as much the creations of people as they were of nature.”16 Pisani asserts that environmental historians need to be cautious about oversimplification. Sometimes the selfsame activists for the public good are the plunderers of nature. He notes

15 Worster, Rivers of Empire, 332.

that the history of the Bureau of Reclamation bears this out.\(^{17}\) The early history of federal reclamation in the Mesilla Valley belies Worster’s contention while it supports Pisani’s perspective.

Mark Fiege’s *Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West* provides a well-reasoned environmental history of irrigation, literally from the ground up.\(^{18}\) Unlike Worster and Pisani whose scopes are national, Fiege’s entire monograph is focused on one region, the Snake River valley in southern Idaho. He covers a period beginning in the 1860s that spans well into the twentieth century. The author is not directly in dialog with Worster or Pisani. Rather, he charts the interplay of humans and nature within the irrigated landscape. This interaction resulted in an environment shaped by the tension between human modification and natural processes. The landscape continually undermined the vision of farmers and engineers. Confronted with such problems as seepage, weeds, rodents, labor needs, fickle markets, and water rights conflict settlers responded with a cooperative approach that blended notions of private property and communal interest, and family labor and industrial labor. Ultimately, the Snake River Valley became a hybrid landscape shaped by dynamic interactions among settlers, nature, industry, technology, and the market. My study of reclamation in the Mesilla Valley, while not specifically an environmental history, is influenced by and contributes to Fiege’s work and similar scholarship. I reveal how environmental conditions, usually influenced by


human activity, led to federal reclamation and helped shape the ways in the Rio Grande Project was implemented in the Mesilla Valley.

There is no study of irrigation in New Mexico that is comparable to Fiege’s. There are, however, important regional studies that incorporate the arguments of Pisani and Worster in varying degrees. Stephen Bogener’s Ditches Across the Desert: Irrigation in the Lower Pecos Valley is an analysis of reclamation and settlement in eastern New Mexico.19 The author shows that competing interests completely undermined the development of a hydraulic elite of businessmen and bureaucrats.

Federal Reclamation began in the Pecos Valley as speculative private irrigation ventures failed shortly after 1900. The progressive engineers of the Bureau of Reclamation reluctantly entered the valley. It was a project they considered too expensive and complicated to meet their agrarian vision. Once the project began, the Bureau was immediately confronted, and its efforts undermined, by local water users who had interests linked with established political and corporate elites in the valley and region. In the end, speculators and some water users won the day as an overburdened Bureau of Reclamation was unable to effectively counter the interests of local elites.

Another reclamation history centered on New Mexico is Kenneth Orona’s dissertation “River of Culture, River of Power: Identity, Modernism, and Contest in the

Middle Rio Grande Valley, 1848-1947.” Orona’s analysis focuses on the communities encompassed by the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy (MRGCD); a reclamation and flood control project in New Mexico’s central Rio Grande Valley. Beginning in 1923 federal and elite interests became intent on reforming the environment and traditional agriculture. Hispanic and Pueblo farmers accepted some aspects of the project, but contested the hegemonic interests of the state and local elites. For example, Hispanic farmers regularly expressed their support for the flood control, but argued that the repayment (tax) burden was too large. Residents also fought for the preservation of their traditional ditch associations. They expressed their interests through petitions, courts, and public meetings. Through this process, local residents asserted their rights as citizens through their opposition to reclamation policies in the middle Rio Grande Valley. Pueblo and Hispanic farmers also maintained traditional farming practices in opposition to the imposition of modern market based agriculture. The dissertation is primarily focused on showing the ways local residents reacted to the imposition of the MRGCD in their communities, but does not lose sight of the fact that these reactions are manifestations of contested views of nature.

Themes and arguments expressed in Orona’s and Bogener’s works use reclamation to address the ways in which community evolves and reacts when confronted with powerful outside forces. Of course, reclamation is not the only vehicle through with to

explore community change in the face of federal power. For example, Suzanne Forrest analyzes the effects of the New Deal among New Mexico’s northern villages in *The Preservation of the Village: New Mexico’s Hispanics and the New Deal*. She argues that the vanguard of federal presence in northern New Mexico was composed of well-intentioned progressive reformers who sought to preserve the traditional values of the villages while modernizing local economies. Their programs, however, represented an incompatible confluence of progressive ideology, government bureaucracy, and capitalism. Cultural programs sought to celebrate communalism while at the same time making the villages more efficient and modern. Villagers embraced those programs that served their purposes and eschewed those that did not. They appreciated the aid and education that reformers provided to their communities, but were leery of efforts to transform Hispanic culture. Moreover, when New Dealers attempted to restore the productivity and availability of communal lands, villagers often sided with local commercial interests against the government’s best intentions.

Sarah Deutsch in *No Separate Refuge: Culture Class, and Gender on an Anglo Hispanic Frontier in the American Southwest, 1880-1940*, addresses themes similar to those Forrest


explores, but adopts a broader chronological and thematic framework. Deutsch reveals how changes wrought by the arrival of the railroad, development of regional industry, migration and the intrusions of white reformers shaped regional community and gender roles. She argues that Anglo intrusion into the region and subsequent rise in the importance of wage labor destabilized traditional communities, especially women’s’ roles. She also reiterates Forrest’s argument that federal intrusion into isolated communities was shaped by ambivalence between notions of modernity and tradition.

Similar conflicts and narratives are clearly represented in the Mesilla Valley. Reclamation engineers racialized local Hispanic residents as pre-modern while they pursued the settlement of experienced white farmers. I show that the reform-minded engineers had little interest in preserving Hispanic culture or tradition, but that the established community structures, which were founded on the management of water, impelled them to contend with the existing community customs and practice. Local conditions and a tradition of interethnic interaction helped to ensure the maintenance of cultural continuity in the face of change.

There is one published monograph that focuses on the Rio Grande Project. Conflict on the Rio Grande: Water and the Law: 1879-1939 written by Douglas R. Littlefield is, however, not an analysis of social or environmental history to any great extent. Instead, Littlefield is interested in the legal history of the Rio Grande Project and the battles and

negotiations over water rights between Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico.\textsuperscript{24} There is also a geography dissertation that directly relates to the Rio Grande Project. In the early 1980s Barbel Hannelore Schonfeld La Mar studied the ways in which the construction of Elephant Butte Dam affected land ownership and agriculture in the Mesilla Valley.\textsuperscript{25} La Mar’s work is mostly quantitative in that it charts the ways that land distribution evolved over the first decades of reclamation in the valley. The author argues that water development was a fundamentally destabilizing event in the rural communities of the Mesilla Valley. She also adopts a perspective in which reclamation automatically represents decline. This may be a reflection of her viewpoint as a geographer studying land tenure.

My work adds to La Mar’s analysis by revealing the ways the changes she delineates affected social interaction and political mobilization in the Mesilla Valley. Moreover, instead of adopting a perspective that necessarily links reclamation with community decline I show that it brought fundamental changes, both good and bad. After all, agriculture, subsistence or otherwise, was a precarious endeavor without reclamation. Many farming communities in the valley were in decline by the time the Rio Grande Project was approved. Federal reclamation gave the farmers a semblance of stability even while it challenged Hispanic tradition.


Local residents were not powerless in the face of federal power. Like Bogener and Orona, I argue that the transformations wrought by reclamation were not imposed from outside without considerable conflict and mediation. A diverse group of local residents in southern New Mexico began accommodating and contesting the Reclamation Service plans as early as 1905. An interethnic cross class group of water users pursued federal reclamation as a solution to their water famine, but through their actions, shaped the ways that the Rio Grande Project was implemented. Local farmers, many of whom owned small farms of less than 50 acres, were active agents in shaping federal power. They, for example, resisted federal control of their ditches and only turned their community acequias over to the Reclamations Service after a significant majority of water users agreed that federal control served their interests. They continued to manage their own ditches over a decade after the project began. Unlike Bogener’s analysis in which many of the activists were speculators and absentee landowners the Rio Grande project was animated by the interplay between local residents, many of whom were small scale farmers, and idealistic engineers.

My dissertation complements Orona’s work by showing that local residents contested policies they deemed were not in their best interest. I, however, move beyond his analysis by shifting the discussion of the rise of the federal water power in New Mexico back two decades. The analysis of reclamation in southern New Mexico reveals that the conflict over the federal management of water was well established by the time the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy became a reality. Where Orona contends, similar to Worster, that a coalition of white elites and federal bureaucrats undermined traditional communities, I argue that the implementation of reclamation was contentious and that conflicts were
rarely simply white elite versus poor Hispanic. There were various shifting levels of cooperation and discord.

Much of the conflict was based on ideology. The history of federal power in the Mesilla Valley is similar to the New Deal in northern New Mexico as described by Forrest. In both cases, representatives of the federal government came into a mostly rural area and hubristically attempted to save the region. In each instance they did succeed in their basic goal, but did not succeed in implementing their larger ideological ambitions. In the case of the Mesilla Valley, reclamation engineers were ambivalent reformers who fetishized a rural agrarian ideal while they celebrated modernity. For example, federal officials were adamant that farms remain small and that farmers live on the land they irrigate while also encouraging commercial farming to help pay the mounting costs of the project.

One important difference between Forrest’s analysis and the situation in the Mesilla Valley is the fact that the reclamation engineers were not attempting to preserve a culture. The men who planned and implemented modern reclamation in the valley were redeeming the productivity of a landscape and had little interest in preserving a Hispanic traditional culture or communal lifeways. In fact, some certainly held patently racist views of Hispanic residents. Ironically, the region maintained a strongly Hispanic character that was facilitated by the fact that local residents of non-Hispanic and Hispanic heritage interacted in the public sphere and market. They had also taken part in the democratic management of water for decades before the Reclamation Service engineers arrived in the Mesilla Valley. Addressing themes similar to Deustch, I show that women played an important role in maintaining the interethnic interaction in the rural communities. I also reveal that labor
systems and the control of water changed over time. The transformation of labor, however, did not necessarily undermine local community relations, even as it undercut the status of some residents.

Finally, reclamation brought environmental change. The Mesilla Valley does not reflect Worster’s contention that powerful elites were able to undermine ecological systems in the pursuit of profit. The situation was more complex. There was never a dominant, consolidated, hydrological elite in the valley. The Mesilla Valley does reflect Pisani’s characterization of reclamation as a conservation movement that shifted from community development to economic development in the 1920s. This is evident in the rise of cotton cultivation as an economic strategy beginning in the 1920s.

Fiege’s study provided the basis of my environmental analysis. The interaction between landscape and community in the Mesilla Valley is clear. Neither existed independent of the other. Agriculture, prior to federal reclamation relied on traditional Hispanic irrigation practices that fundamentally linked community to the field and river through cooperative management of acequias. These traditions continued once of the Rio Grande Project began. Decisions, moreover, were shaped by the interaction of environment and resident. For example, alfalfa, a drought tolerant market crop, became important during the water famine. Fertilizer, on the other hand, became necessary for the first time after federal reclamation development resulted in the reduction of silt loads in the river, which reduced the fertility of farmlands.

Indeed, the history of reclamation in the Mesilla Valley reveals that Reclamation Service officials’ efforts to remake the Mesilla Valley into their ideal of an efficient modern
farming oasis were continually complicated by local conditions and bureaucratic bias. In this way, the dissertation adds to the historiography that argues that federal water development was an ambivalent enterprise in which the Reclamation Service had no choice but to accommodate local interests and conditions. Mesilla Valley residents played an active role in shaping the ways that federal engineers hoped to reform and remake the valley. This dissertation also contributes to histories that address the ways communities resisted change imposed from outside. Local citizens, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, supported modern change that they felt served their interests and resisted changes that did not.
Map 1: Location of the Mesilla Valley in New Mexico
Federal reclamation in the Mesilla Valley was implemented in a region in which water and community were intertwined. Valley residents had spent six decades living in towns and hamlets where the Rio Grande influenced settlement, culture, politics, and local economies. Indeed, water was the foundation upon which the Mesilla Valley communities were built. The communities, ultimately based on interaction across ethnic lines, were remarkable in their adaptability. Residents embraced change and defended custom to suit their interests. In this manner, they were able to preserve elements of cultural continuity as modern irrigation transformed the valley.

The importance of adaptability was present from the residents’ initial forays into the valley. Their experiences were shaped by the Rio Grande, which, like many rivers, was a dynamic historical agent where abundance and scarcity could cause entire communities to thrive or wither. The significance of water has been particularly acute in the Southwest. Until very recently, it was the primary factor shaping community. Historian Michael C. Meyer in his study of water in the Southwest United States under Spanish and Mexican regimes writes that it “actuated and dominated . . . social and economic relationships,” and significantly influenced politics. He makes the prescient point that humans and rivers are not independent of each other. They operate in an arrangement marked by reciprocity in which the application of technology changes nature, but results in “unintended and unanticipated natural reactions [that] in turn influence the society which precipitated the
original change.”¹ In effect, the society and the river are intertwined and interactive on multiple levels.

The Rio Grande in southern New Mexico reflects this relationship. As the river courses through the region it traverses a landscape of its own making characterized by short canyons and broad fertile valleys, including the Mesilla Valley. For centuries, a regular cycle of floods deposited rich sediment in wide swaths along valley floors creating relatively flat and very fertile sections of land ranging from less than one to five miles wide abutting the river. Benchlands and desert flank the non-riparian edges of the valley. Long the domain of Mescalero Apache, the Mesilla Valley provided camps for travelers along El Camino Real, but did not attract lasting settlement until the late 1840s.

The initial settlement of the Mesilla Valley illuminates the syncretic relationship between society and water. On 3 July 1840, José María Costales and one hundred fifteen fellow residents of El Paso del Norte presented a petition to prefect Jose Morales

¹ Meyer calls this condition ecoculturation (as opposed to acculturation). Environmental determinism is not subsumed under this concept. Neither the river, in this case, nor the settlers are passive agents of history. See Micheal C. Meyer, Water in the Hispanic Southwest: A social and Legal History 1550-1850 (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 1996), Pg. 7-9. Meyer’s work indirectly relates to the historiography of reclamation. His topic predates the rise of modern irrigation, but the themes he addresses are germane to the region covered in this dissertation. Mark Fiege, moreover, has adopted a concept similar to Meyers’ model (though he does not call it ecoculturation) in his recent study of reclamation in the Snake River Valley in Idaho. He notes that the interaction between humans and nature within the irrigated landscape has resulted in an environment shaped by the tension between human modification and natural processes. Ultimately, the Snake River Valley became a hybrid landscape shaped by dynamic interactions among settlers, nature, industry, technology, and the market. See Mark Fiege, Irrigated Eden: The Making of an Agricultural Landscape in the American West (Seattle WA: University of Washington Press, 2000).
requesting lands for colonization near the Rio Grande at an El Camino Real campsite known as the Doña Ana Bend, approximately fifty miles north of El Paso del Norte. The petitioners’ chief argument was one of desperation. Rio Grande floods made their land near El Paso unsuitable for agriculture. The men whose names appeared on the petition had been unable to provide for their own subsistence since 1828. The location the Mexican farmers proposed to settle was at a wide bow in the Rio Grande that was known for its agricultural potential. The petition included two other arguments. First, the potential settlers noted that they could serve as a bulwark against Indian attacks. Second, and perhaps more important from a social and economic perspective, they asserted that the settlement would promote industry and communication. The petitioners were arguing that the colony would not be isolated from El Paso, Chihuahua, or Mexico. In fact, they envisioned their settlement as an important extension of the market and state.

The petition made its way through the necessary administrative channels and the Governor of Chihuahua approved the establishment of Doña Ana Bend as a civil colony on August 5, 1840. Civil colony grants differed markedly from private grants, which were provided to influential residents, often as rewards for service. Colony grants were lands

This was the group’s second attempt at securing colonization rights in the Mesilla Valley. Their first request was presented to the prefect on September 18, 1839. It was approved but not acted upon by the Governor of Chihuahua. J.J. Bowden, *Spanish and Mexican Land Grants of the Chihuahuan Acquisition* (El Paso, TX: Texas Western Press, 1971), Pg. 67.

The petition, dated July 3, 1840, is reproduced in *Senate Executive Documents*, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 11-2 (in Spanish) and Pgs. 50-2 (English translation).

given to groups with the intent of establishing settlements. The grants stipulated that settlers receive tracts of land for small farms and homes. Title to these allotments carried an associated right to use common lands for such activities as grazing and supplemental resource harvest (building materials, wild plants, game). Individual grants, on the other hand, usually only required that the grantee hold the land for at least four years after which he could dispose of it in any manner he chose.5

The Doña Ana Bend Colony6 was not an instant success. As soon as he heard that the colony was approved, the Prefect of El Paso del Norte José Morales, informed the petitioners that emigration was approved and that they should prepare to travel to the grant. The colonists demurred. They argued that they could not go to the Mesilla Valley because they were too poor and the Indians too violent. Costales and his compatriots, however, did not abandon the project. Instead they asked for an extension of the date of migration. The prefect agreed and rescheduled migration for February 1, 1843. Ultimately, only thirty-three of the original petitioners traveled to the grant in the winter of 1843. By February they had commenced setting up a precarious community.

5 There were also quasi-community grants. In this arrangement, the individual grantee had the right to sell the entire grant after four years, yet at the same time he was required to provide for settlement and the provision of common lands. It is this type of grant that has been the most difficult for United States courts to reconcile. See the description of land grant types provided by the Center for Land Grant Studies. Available at http://www.southwestbooks.org/grantstypes.htm. 

6 Maps of Hispanic land grants in the Mesilla Valley follow this chapter on pages 73 and 74.
In the regulations establishing the colony, the Governor of Chihuahua specified four actions the settlers were to take in setting up their settlement. First, they were to clear an area for cultivation within six months. Second, they were expected to pay their taxes. Third, the settlers were required to serve as a militia. Finally, and most important, the colonists were instructed to “contribute with their personal services in the construction of [an] ... acequia.”7 Bernabé Montoya, a fifty-nine year old widower, was selected as leader of the colonists and tasked with overseeing the construction of an *acequia madre*, or primary ditch.8 The prefect provided him with specific stipulations for the construction of the ditch. Montoya was instructed to carefully take into account the locations where the water would be taken out of, and returned to, the river so as to serve “the large population which in time may be formed.”9 The *acequia* was to be between two and two and a half *varas*10 wide. Its depth was left to Montoya’s discretion. The prefect also gave Montoya the responsibility to

7 The regulations, dated July 31, 1840, are reproduced in *Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 24-6, 65-7.*

8 José Morales, El Paso, TX, February 2, 1843 in *Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, 29, 69-70; Antonio Rey and J. Dolores Madrid, “Padron de las vecinos estantes y habitantes que hay en esta nueva poblacion,” in *Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 38, 79.*

9 José Morales, El Paso, TX, February 2, 1843 in *Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 29, 70.*

10 *A vara* is equivalent to approximately 33 linear inches.
ensure that laborers “perform their tasks in equal proportion,” and the authority to impose penalties on those that do not comply.\textsuperscript{11}

The importance of the excavation of the \textit{acequia madre} cannot be understated. Indeed, the settlement at Doña Ana did not exist in any real sense until a reasonably dependable water source was secured. Regulations establishing the colony explicitly stated that the Governor would not distribute land to settlers until the ditch was completed. Work on the ditch began immediately upon the settlers’ arrival. Using crude wooden hand tools, the men quickly excavated an \textit{acequia}. The ditch, when finally completed, was approximately ten miles long and certainly not straight. It would have shifted course to skirt hills, trees, rocks, and other immovable landscape features. Any constructed irrigation works such as dams and gates would have been built of locally available materials, including mud and timber.\textsuperscript{12} The completed \textit{acequia} took water out of the Rio Grande at the north end of a large bend in the river and conveyed water to settlers’ agricultural allotments and the town before returning water to the river at the south end of the bend.

Construction was no easy endeavor in the best of circumstances, but task became more difficult as colonists abandoned the settlement and returned to El Paso del Norte. In

\textsuperscript{11} José Morales, El Paso, TX, February 2, 1843 in \textit{Senate Executive Documents}, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 43, 29, 70; Regulations dated July 31, 1840, in \textit{Senate Executive Documents}, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 24-6, 65-7.

\textsuperscript{12} José A. Rivera, \textit{Acequia Culture: Water, Land and Community in the Southwest} (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1998), 3; Marc Simmons, \textit{Spanish Pathways: Readings in the History of Hispanic New Mexico} (Albuquerque, NM.: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), Pg. 133; Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pg. 69.
fact, only eighteen of the original settlers took part in construction of the irrigation ditch.\textsuperscript{13}

On April 16, 1843, the remaining settlers, all men, sent a letter to the Governor of Chihuahua noting that due to the lack of men available for labor, the ditch was not complete. They were not able to get water to the lands they had selected for settlement and cultivation and asked the governor to compel workers from other districts to travel to the colony to assist in the construction of the acequia. The request was denied on the grounds that it was exorbitant. No member of another community could be compelled to “lend service to another.” The settlers also asked that even though they had not finished the acequia, and therefore individual lands had not been distributed by the order of the Governor, they be allowed to temporarily plant crops on tracts of their choice. This last request was granted. The settlers completed enough of the ditch in April to plant a small communal plot with corn, beans, and other vegetables to sustain them in the winter.\textsuperscript{14}

\textsuperscript{13} There seems to be some confusion on this point. Some historians have noted that By April 16, 1843 only fourteen settlers remained. This claim can be traced to an uncited claim in a 1903 masters thesis by Maude McFie Bloom. The data is also located in a recently edited and published version of the thesis. See Maude Elizabeth McFie (Bloom), \textit{A History of the Mesilla Valley 1903}, edited and annotated by Lansing B. Bloom and Jo Tice Bloom (Las Cruces, NM.: Yucca Tree Press, 1999) Pgs. 16, 19. The colonists’ April 16 1843 petition contains twenty-six names. Finally an April 17, 1843 letter from the prefect of El Paso del Norte to the Governor of Chihuahua notes that eighteen men were involved in ditch construction in the first months of settlement. See Petition of April 16 1843 and Mauricio Ugarte and J. Dolores Madrid to Governor of Chihuahua, April 17, 1843 in \textit{Senate Executive Documents, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 43}, Pgs. 29-31, 69-71.

\textsuperscript{14} Mauricio Ugarte and J. Dolores Madrid to Governor of Chihuahua, April 17, 1843 and Joaquin Valverde and Jose Dolores Madrid to Governor of Chihuahua, October 30, 1843 in \textit{Senate Executive Documents, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 43}, Pgs. 30-1,32-3, 71-3; Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pg. 69.
Once the crops were planted, life settled into a tenuous routine that dominated the first year at Doña Ana Bend. A typical day consisted of half the residents working the fields while always on edge for fear of Apache attacks. The other seven men stayed in town constructing homes and other buildings. It is not clear if these were permanent. The town was not yet established by law. Attrition continued. By October 1843 only fourteen settlers remained.

The men’s efforts were rewarded. They harvested a bumper crop. This along with a temporary peace negotiated with the Mescalero Apache led to renewed interest in the Doña Ana Bend Colony. Many of the original petitioners and scores of new colonists began migrating to the Mesilla Valley. By January 1844, the population had exploded from fourteen to two hundred sixty one. No longer was the demographic profile all male. The wives and children of the original settlers joined their husbands and fathers in Doña Ana. Children as young as one year old traveled to the fledgling colony with their parents. Other single men and women, families, widows, and widowers arrived. The prefect of El Paso,

15 Bowden, Land Grants, 69; Joaquin Valverde and Jose Dolores Madrid to Governor of Chihuahua, October 30, 1843 and Antonio Rey and J. Dolores, Madrid, “Padron de las vecinos estantes y habitantes que hay en esta nueva poblacion,” in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 32-3, 38-40, 73, 79-81. McFie lists as the original fourteen settlers as Pablo Melederez, José María Costales, Juan José Benavides, Francisco Rodriguez, Jesus Olvares, José María Bernal, José María Perea, Francisco Lucero, Geronimo Lujan, Saturnino Abillar, José Ines Garcia, Gabriel Dabalos, Ramon de la Serna and one un-named individual. See McFie (Bloom), A History of the Mesilla Valley, Pg. 19.

16 The crops included beans, corn, cotton, and other unspecified vegetables. The largest crop was corn, which totaled 1200 fanegas (1200-2400 bushels). See Joaquin Valverde and Jose Dolores Madrid to Governor of Chihuahua, October 30, 1843 in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 32-33, 73.
Antonio Rey, conducted a census of the settlement and reported that it had a population of 107 men, 59 women, and 95 children. This expansion of population and increase in resident dependants led to the urgent need for the distribution of land.\textsuperscript{17}

A group of fifty-four settlers petitioned the prefect of El Paso in January 1844 asking him to distribute the lands to which they were entitled. Clearly, the development of irrigation was still a pressing matter. The men apologized for the fact that they had not yet completed the \textit{acequia madre}, but asserted that they should get the lands anyway because they had a number of men working on the ditch and it would be completed within a week. Official distribution of personal agricultural tracts was contingent upon the completion of the main ditch. In an effort to overcome this legal limitation, the petitioners argued that they needed to get their allotments because wheat crop had to be planted soon.\textsuperscript{18} The settlers also asked for oxen and peons to assist in ditch construction.

It is not clear if the laborers or livestock were ever sent to the colony, but the petition had its desired effect. Antonio Rey arrived in Doña Ana on January 19, 1844 to expedite the distribution of land and establishment of civil authority. Rey ascertained that there were forty-seven families and twenty-two single men who were entitled to individual agricultural allotments.\textsuperscript{19} Taking the fertility of the land and regulation establishing the

\textsuperscript{17} Antonio Rey and J. Dolores Madrid, “Padron de las vecinos estantes y habitantes que hay en esta nueva pobicion,” in \textit{Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess.}, Document Number 43, Pgs. 38-40, 79-81.

\textsuperscript{18} Petition of January 9, 1844, in \textit{Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess.}, Document Number 43, Pgs. 33,74.

\textsuperscript{19} Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pg. 69.
colony into account, he determined that the head of each family shall have a lot of 780.5 square varas, or approximately 108 acres. Single residents were entitled to a lot 390.25 square varas, or about 54 acres. The prefect surveyed and marked agricultural plots in a rectangular area crossed by the Camino Real. The fourteen settlers who had persevered on the grant for a year were given the right to choose their own land. Other settlers were awarded agricultural land via a lottery. The acequia was near enough to completion that Rey was able to distribute water rights. While it is not clear exactly when ditch was completed, it was likely finished by early spring. Each allottee was granted a water right based on the size of his lands. Larger lots received 36 hours of water. Smaller lots were entitled to 32 hours of water. Irrigation water was provided to lots on a rotational basis beginning at the northeast corner of the agricultural fields. The prefect noted in a message to the governor that when he arrived in Doña Ana he was approached by a representative of a group of influential citizens of El Paso who wanted agricultural lands in the colony. They had no intention of working the fields themselves, but would find peons to

---------------------

20 Antonio Rey and J. Dolores Madrid to Seonores jueces de paz y vecinos de esta punto, January 25, 1844, in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 35-6, 76-7.

21 Antonio Rey and J. Dolores Madrid to Seonores jueces de paz y vecinos de esta punto, January 25, 1844; Antonio Rey, report dated March 17, 1844 in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 40-1, 82; Bowden, Land Grants, Pg. 70.
raise crops in their stead. The prefect assumed their intentions were speculative and refused to grant their request on the grounds that it was beyond his scope of authority. 

Rey also established the layout the town. First, he instructed the residents to build a palisade at the mouth of the nearly completed acequia. He ordered that the mouth of the ditch be widened to three varas in order to ensure that all farms and the town get a dependable supply of water. Except for the mayordomo’s (el repartidor de la aziquua [sic] madre) residence which was located between the mouth the acequia madre and the townsite, the town was at an elevation that “provide[d] a fair view [and] overlook[d] a large portion of the fields.” All residents were awarded town plots upon which to construct their residences. Next, Rey designated a plaza flanked by the sites where the church, priest’s residence, and public buildings were to be constructed. Finally, the prefect formed the municipal government by appointing Pablo Melederez and José María Costales justices of the peace.

On January 26, Rey officially noted that his role in the establishment of the Doña Ana was complete. He stated in the message to the governor of Chihuahua that he had marked

22 Antonio Rey, report dated March 17, 1844 in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 40-1 82.

23 Antonio Rey and J. Dolores Madrid to Señores jueces de paz y vecinos de esta punto, January 25, 1844, Rey and Madrid, proclamation of January 24, 1844, and Antonio Rey,”Nombramiento de juez de paz,” January 25, 1844 in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 35-6, 37, 76-7, 78.
the boundaries of the grant, distributed allotments, and laid out the town and made provisions for a dependable water supply. 24

While Rey granted lands to those with legitimate claims, he did not provide the settlers with title to their lands. He instructed Melenderez to make sure that all settlers who were interested in gaining legal title to their lands provide appropriate paper work to the prefecture when they got a chance. By March, he had received paperwork for only six allotments. His faith in the colonists must have been wavering. He wrote that they must be discouraged “on account of their poverty” or lack of motivation and predicted that the colony would soon be abandoned. There was some evidence to support his prediction. By the spring of 1844, 31 of the 69 grantees had renounced their lands and left the settlement, reducing the population of Doña Ana by 111.25

Doña Ana did not disappear. It continued to grow. Eventually, a new prefect of El Paso del Norte, Guadalupe Miranda, was informed forcefully by the residents of Doña Ana that they had not received title to their lands.26 To remedy the situation, on January 26, 1846, he


25 Antonio Rey, report dated March 17, 1844 in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 40-1 82.

26 Guadalupe Miranda, “Note Number 13,” in Senate Executive Documents, 43rd Cong., 1st Sess., Document Number 43, Pgs. 21, 61-2. Guadalupe Miranda was born in El Paso Del Norte in 1810. By 1829, he had moved north to Santa Fé, where he taught school. By 1833, Miranda returned to El Paso Del Norte, only to venture back to Santa Fé five years later. Governor Manuel Armijo appointed the young man to a series of posts including Secretary of the Territory and Collector of Customs and Captain of Militia. He, however, is likely best known as one of the original proprietors of the Maxwell Land Grant in Northern New Mexico and Southern Colorado. Miranda, who had become a confidant of Governor Manuel
authorized Melenderez to issue title to existing residents and provide land to new settlers. This arrangement continued until the end of the Mexican American war in 1848.  

The first five years of the Doña Ana Bend Civil Colony illustrate several important characteristics of settlement in the Mesilla Valley. Water was central to the establishment of the community. The river, in flood and drought, had the power to dislocate families and neighbors. Doña Ana’s original settlers left El Paso because they had lost their livelihoods to the Rio Grande. At the same time, regulations establishing the colony specified that the construction of an *acequia madre* be one of the principal tasks the colonists undertake. In fact, the settlement was not officially established until the ditch was complete. Ensuring a dependable supply of irrigation water took precedence over almost everything, including the establishment of municipal government and religious institutions. This condition was not unique to Don Ana. Historian Michael Meyer writes that this was the norm in the Southwest and it was not limited to small agricultural outposts. *Acequia* construction was

______________________________

Armijo, and Charles Beaubien were awarded the enormous grant on January 8, 1841. Miranda never lived on the grant. He returned his hometown in 1845 where served as the Prefect of El Paso Del Norte. After the Mexican American War, Miranda chose to retain his Mexican citizenship. He subsequently served as mayor (alcalde) of El Paso Del Norte (now Juarez, Mexico) and as Commissioner of Emigration. Twenty years later Miranda provided testimony before the U.S. Surveyor General in support of Mesilla Valley emigration grants, especially the Mesilla Civil Colony grant. Miranda eventually moved to Chihuahua, Mexico where he died in 1890. See [http://www.newmexicohistory.org/filedetails.php?fileID=4769](http://www.newmexicohistory.org/filedetails.php?fileID=4769)

______________________________

*27* Bowden, *Land Grants*, Pg. 70.
the primary project in the establishment of Santa Fe and even the establishment of a Catholic mission was contingent on the completion of an initial irrigation ditch.  

Water management played a dominant role in local politics. Settlers and government officials knew that successful colonization required the cooperative use of water. 

*Mayordomos*, ditch overseers, held considerable power in communities like Doña Ana. Following traditions that were centuries old, the *mayordomo* was responsible for the enforcing the allocation of water through the careful scrutiny of irrigation rotations. They were required to allocate water in such a way that farmers could prosper while water resources were preserved. This was no easy task along the unpredictable course of the Rio Grande. Periods of drought often led to reduced rations, which resulted in conflict among farmers. *Mayordomos* were expected to act as mediators in these situations. They also organized and directed the maintenance of the ditches. It was typically expected that all water users assist in the maintenance and repair of the ditches and other irrigation structures. The amount of work required of each person was determined in relation to the amount of land he had fronting the *acequia madre*. Residents with means could pay laborers to perform the work in their stead. Community water management was serious business and farmers who defied the *mayordomo*; refused to contribute to *acequia* maintenance; or used more than their allocation of water could be fined. In rural struggling communities, like Doña Ana, a *mayordomo’s* responsibilities also probably extended

______________

beyond the management of water. His power, however, was not absolute. *Mayordomos* served and prospered at the will of the irrigators. Every year, the local farmers who used irrigation elected their *mayordomo* and set his salary.\(^{29}\) Community and water were inseparable in the Spanish and Mexican southwest. Doña Ana was no exception. Indeed, the *mayordomo*-centered water democracies were the most fundamental social and political organizations in the Mesilla Valley.

The management of water flowing in the Rio Grande, however, was not the only force that influenced the fledgling colony at Doña Ana Bend. Almost as important as the river was the fact that the colony was literally bisected by the Camino Real, a road established by Don Juan de Oñate in 1598. The road was the major route of travel and trade between Chihuahua, Santa Fe, and the United States when Costales and his companions petitioned the governor for a colony grant.\(^{30}\) In fact, the site of settlement was a well-known campsite along the road. It was located at one of the last hospitable locales before travelers ventured away from the Rio Grande into a section of the road aptly named the *Jornada del Muerto*, a forbidding and deadly section of desert characterized by massive lava flows, sand dunes, and...


\(^{30}\) Andres Resédez provides analysis of the development and effects of trade along the Camino Real and Santa Fe trail. He argues that trade encouraged interethnic contact and made New Mexicans more dependent on American goods. See Andrés Resédez, *Changing National Identities at the Frontier: Texas and New Mexico, 1800-1850* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2005), Pgs. 93-123.
and little water. The Camino Real ensured that while the settlement was isolated, it was not insular. It also allowed residents to maintain active regional links. The road was only the first of many routes that eventually passed through the Mesilla Valley. They all played important roles in regional history.

The Doña Ana Colony was a natural place of respite for travelers, Mexican and American. Significant amounts of commerce passed through Doña Ana from the beginning. Two hundred thirty wagons and 350 men conveyed goods between Santa Fe and Chihuahua in 1843. Three years later this traffic had increased to 363 wagons and 750 men.31 The residents of the colony were not oblivious. William G. Glasgow, a trader from Missouri, notes in his diary that he spent Christmas Day 1846 encamped outside Doña Ana grinding corn “obtained from that village.” In a letter to relative, he writes that he spent New Years day in Doña Ana “perched upon a big pile of corn eating peach pies.” 32 George Rutledge Gibson, a U.S. soldier during the Mexican American War, noted that he and his companions were able to purchase Aguardiente, dried fruit, pumpkins, and corn in Doña Ana in the winter of 1846. The U.S. army purchased corn, pumpkins, cattle, sheep, grain, forage, meal, watermelons, dried fruit, and wine from Doña Ana residents in 1846 and 1847. Only Albuquerque provided a more diverse selection of goods. Susan Magoffin traveled along the Camino Real with her husband, Samuel. She notes that her party

31 Max L. Moorhead, New Mexico’s Royal Road: Trade and Travel on the Chihuahua Trail (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1958), Pgs. 64, 75.

purchased corn in Doña Ana in February, 1847. Regrettably, none of these commentators enumerated what the citizens of Doña Ana received in these transactions, but historian Max Moorhead in his study of the Camino Real, states that trade with Americans made New Mexicans dependent on the Santa Fe trade for their increasingly sophisticated standard of living. It also allowed for the creation of a new class of elite Hispanic merchants. There is little question that these trends were developing in Doña Ana by 1847 and that the Camino Real allowed residents of Doña Ana to be immersed in regional markets. The river and road were linked in a fundamental way. The Rio Grande allowed the settlement to thrive and provided water for crops that were, in turn, marketed to travelers along the Camino Real.

It is also clear that the road also provided mobility. Demographic fluctuations in the first years clearly illuminate this phenomenon. As demonstrated in the discussion above, the population of the colony ballooned and deflated quite regularly during the first few years as colonists came and went, often more than once. It is likely that the proximity of the road to the colony encouraged this fluidity of movement. By 1848 many more were coming

33 Albert H. Schroeder, “The Camino Real in 1846-1847,” in El Camino Real de Tierra Adentro, Cultural Resources Series No. 11 1993, comp. Gabrielle G. Palmer (Santa Fe, NM: Bureau of Land Management, 1993), Pg. 180; Stephen G. Hyslop, Bound for Santa Fe: The Road to New Mexico and the American Conquest, 1806-1848 (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 2002), Pg. 373; Stella M. Drumm, ed., Down the Santa Fe Trail and into Mexico: The Diary of Susan Shelby Magoffin, 1846-1847 (Lincoln, NE.: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), Pg. 200. Magoffin also relates the endemic racial tension that some of the non-Hispanic travelers brought to the Mesilla Valley. Two members of her party traveled to Dona Ana on their own and purloined a cannon that the U.S. Army had given to the community for protection from Indians. The thieves asserted that they took the cannon because it was too good for the Mexicans. When informed that they had to return it, the men made the cannon inoperable. See Drumm, Susan Shelby Magoffin, Pg. 201.

34 Moorhead, Royal Road, Pgs. 192- 4.
than leaving. The village of Doña Ana had become crowded enough that other settlements were established on the grant, including Las Cruces.35 Again the river provided the hope for sustenance and, perhaps, prosperity, while the road allowed for practical travel to the settlements to and from the Mesilla Valley.

One other characteristic was readily apparent by 1848. Residents were not isolated from their government. The regularity with which the colonists petitioned their government for redress is significant, though not unusual in Spanish America. For example, between September 1839 and January 1948 the colonists presented at least six petitions and several other similar communications to the prefect in El Paso del Norte asking for relief or assistance. In each case, the petition was reviewed by the prefect and Governor. More often than not, the residents’ wishes were granted. Few requests were denied in the early years of the colony. The act of petitioning had deeper implications that just getting wants and needs met. It represented a dialog with the state and reflected a sense of citizenship. Historian Ramona Falcon has studied the use of the petition among Mexican communities in the second half of the nineteenth century. She argues that the documents were an important tool for the expression of citizenship and refutes characterizations of the petition as tools of tradition. In fact, she notes that the petition was an important mechanism for citizens, especially the poor, to express their individual and corporate rights (and needs) after Mexican independence. 36 To petition the government is to express

35 A map of settlements in the Mesilla Valley follows this chapter on page 75.

oneself as a citizen. Five years after the first colonists began digging the *Acequia Madre* in Doña Ana, settlers could be confident that they were in dialog with a, usually, responsive government.

Eighteen forty-eight was, no doubt, a pivotal year in the Mesilla Valley and the river and road took on new meanings while reflecting old traditions. The Mexican American War ended and with the stroke of a pen the residents of the valley found themselves teetering between two nations. The ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo in May 1848 resulted in the cession of millions of acres of Mexican territory to the United States. This vast area included all or parts of what are now the states of California, Nevada, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico, and Wyoming. The Rio Grande flowing through the Mesilla Valley became more than a river of sustenance. It was transformed into a political boundary, a line of empire dividing the United States and Mexico. In the most general sense, Doña Ana, on the east bank of the river, suddenly became part of the United States. Territory west of the river remained Mexican.

Borders have a way a begetting dynamic identities. The river became a fulcrum for the sorting out of social and political identities. The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo set the stage by stipulating citizenship. Article VIII of the treaty encouraged Mexicans living in the lands ceded by the treaty to establish national identity. Those who chose to remain in the new Untied States territory had one year to express their intention to remain Mexican citizens, or become American citizens. Those who did not state an intention to become American citizens one year after ratification were considered to “have elected to become
citizens of the United States.”\textsuperscript{37} It was up to Congress to officially grant of citizenship. The treaty triggered various reactions. Some New Mexicans expressed their intent to retain Mexican nationality and remain in the ceded territory; others chose to become American. According to historian, Richard Griswold Del Castillo, as many as two thousand New Mexicans elected to retain their Mexican citizenship.\textsuperscript{38} The majority of Mexicans in the new American lands did not express an intention either way.

Another group of New Mexican’s decided to express their national identity through where they resided. Some actively chose to stay in the United States, while many others repatriated across the Rio Grande. This was not a process that occurred without considerable effort by the Mexican government. Before the treaty was ratified, Mexican President Santa Anna proposed that defensive settlements be established at the new border between Mexico and the United States. He expected that these communities would serve as borderland buffers to American imperialism. In the summer of 1848, President José Joaquín de Herrera’s administration acted on Santa Ana’s proposal with a plan that envisioned the establishment of eighteen colonies along the international border. The settlements were to be populated by repatriates from the ceded territory. As an incentive,

\textsuperscript{37} Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, February 2, 1848, U.S. Statutes at Large 9:922, Section VIII.

settlers were paid twelve to twenty-five pesos and compensated for their moving expenses.\textsuperscript{39}

To implement the repatriation plan, the Mexican government sent commissioners into New Mexico, California, and Texas to recruit settlers. The men found very few eager repatriates in California. They had some success in Texas. In New Mexico, however, the commissioners were met with more enthusiasm. By 1849, between 1500 and two thousand Mexicans had moved across the Rio Grande to new settlements in the Mesilla Valley.\textsuperscript{40} Others moved south of El Paso. A convergence of factors precipitated settlement west of the Rio Grande. The repatriation efforts of the Mexican government were certainly important, but beleaguered residents took it upon themselves to relocate across the river before they ever received a grant. Some may have simply moved to preserve their Mexican identity, but another powerful force that expressed itself in 1849 also impelled many to move.

Residents of Doña Ana bore witness to the pressures that prompted some settlers to relocate. The Mesilla Valley had the inauspicious luck of being in a location prized by regional newcomers. First, the strategic value of the area was not lost on the United States Army. They established a fort at Doña Ana in 1849. The military presence along with the


\textsuperscript{40} Griswold Del Castillo, Guadalupe Hidalgo, Pgs. 64-5; Mangusso, “Citizenship Provisions,” Pg. 60.
valley’s location along the southern route to the California gold fields resulted in the first efforts to divest Mexicans of their land. Some disillusioned or exhausted argonauts decided to settle in the region. They were joined by speculators from Texas who quickly began to challenge the validity of Doña Ana residents’ land titles. Finally, Mexicans from the El Paso area relocated to Las Cruces and Doña Ana. Reflecting the mobility that first brought settlers to the Mesilla Valley, Rafael Ruelas and sixty Doña Ana residents abandoned their land on March 1, 1850 and ventured to a low plateau of unappropriated land on the west side of the river. The new settlement was about eight miles south of their former homes. Over the next two years scores of Mexicans followed Ruelas across the river. Settlers came from the El Paso area and northern New Mexico. Some were fleeing villages that had been inundated by the Rio Grande. Men and women of all classes made the Mesilla Valley their new home. Poor individuals and families accompanied peons and laborers who arrived with patrons. In fact, by 1853, Mexican repatriates and emigrants, and a few non-Hispanics, mostly merchants and military veterans, had established and populated settlements along the west banks of the river from Doña Ana almost to El Paso Del Norte.


42 Katherine D. Stoes, “Early History of Doña Ana County,” in Griggs, *Mesilla Valley*, 95; Mary Daniels Taylor and Nona Barrick. *A Place as Wild as the West Ever Was: Mesilla, New Mexico 1848-1872* (Las Cruces, NM.: New Mexico State University Museum, 2004), Pgs. 25, 27.
Like the earlier establishment of Doña Ana, the Mexicans wasted little time clearing fields, digging ditches, building residences, and forming communities. The Mesilla *acequia* was in operation by 1851 when Rafael Ruelas confidently informed officials in Chihuahua that even though there was a drought, farmers in Mesilla had produced approximately 200 fanegas of wheat, corn, and other crops, which probably included chile, beans, squash, pumpkins, and potatoes. Eventually, grapes, quince, peach, and other fruit trees were planted. Ruelas also pointed out that good schools had been established in the town.\(^{43}\)

Residents did not sever ties with their government. Often within a year settlers sent petitions to Mexican representatives requesting that their towns and croplands be legally recognized through the formal establishment of land grants. This was the path the residents of Refugio de Los Amoles, Mesilla, and Santo Tomas followed. Their pleas met with success. By 1853 the Mexican Government had confirmed the towns’ legal status through a series of emigration grants that comprised almost 70,000 acres. The grants were known as Refugio, Mesilla Civil Colony, and Santo Tomas de Iturbide, respectively.\(^{44}\)

When Ramon Ortiz and Guadalupe Miranda confirmed the grants in 1852 and 1853 they provided individual farm and town allotments and water rights to settlers, established or recognized towns and plazas, and set aside communal pasturage and parklands. It did not take long for the landscape around Mesilla to become interlaced with ditches. The state

\(^{43}\) Want, “Adobes of Chamberino,” Pgs. 171-2; Taylor and Barrick, *Wild as the West Ever Was*, Pg. 41.

\(^{44}\) Emigration grants were similar to civil colony grants, but were explicitly for Mexican citizens who did not want to become American citizens after the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo.
government of Chihuahua also established specific regulations that included the organization of local government in the civil colonies. All males over the age of twenty-one were instructed to elect their own justice of the peace, a six member town council, a solicitor, and a *mayordomo* in order to provide for efficient local village governance. The elected officials were expected to be in direct communication with the *ayuntamiento* (city council) and state government. These regulations applied to grants with more than thirty residents. This, however, was not a universal condition in the Mesilla Valley.

The Jose Manuel Sanchez Baca Grant, for example, did not reflect the conditions or early history of the Refugio, Mesilla, and Santo Tomas Grants. It did not encompass an area where an unofficial settlement already existed. Instead, the nearly 4,000 acre grant was provisionally provided to Jose Manuel Sanchez Baca in 1849. Baca, a wealthy Mexican from northern New Mexico chose to relocate to the Mesilla Valley with his livestock, family, and peons after the ratification of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. The grant, located between the Santo Tomas and Refugio grants, contained provisions that Baca retain and occupy the land for at least four years and cultivate tillable land. Baca mostly used the land for grazing his livestock, but by 1852 he had built a small cabin on the property and had two hundred acres under cultivation. However, he and his family resided at Santo Tomas.46


The Baca grant was the last of a handful of private grants established in New Mexico’s Mesilla Valley. As late as 1853, none of these grants stimulated significant settlement or encouraged much commerce. These grants included the oldest grant in the area, the Santa Teresa Grant, which was provided to Francisco Garcia, the military Commandant of El Paso Del Norte, in 1768. It was located West of the Rio Grande, south of the Refugio Grant. Garcia used the grant as a commercial livestock ranch upon which he grazed thousands of sheep and cattle.\textsuperscript{47} He did not practice agriculture or encourage settlement. This regime continued until 1840 when Garcia’s son, Jose Maria Garcia permanently occupied the grant. While ranch operation continued to revolve around livestock, some land was placed under cultivation.\textsuperscript{48} This was, apparently, still the case in the 1850s.

The Mesilla Valley also contained two grants east of the Rio Grande. The Bracito Grant, located just south of the Doña Ana Civil Colony Grant was first proposed as a military settlement in 1805. Juan Antonio Garcia, the proponent of the colony, however, had difficulty finding willing settlers. His petition also met with controversy because the lands that the proposed grant encompassed were used by residents of El Paso del Norte for pasture. Garcia finally received his grant in 1825, but did not establish a colony. He and his family resided on the lands for a brief period before returning to El Paso. Garcia did cultivate the fertile land near the river. He pastured sheep on the mesas above the river


\textsuperscript{48} Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pgs. 11-2.
bottomlands. The grant was vacant within three years. In 1851 Garcia’s heirs agreed to sell the majority of their property to Hugh Stephenson, a Missourian who had settled in El Paso in 1824. The purchase was completed in 1854 when Stephenson paid Garcia $1,000 for the northern two thirds of the Bracito Grant. Garcia retained the southern portion. The Canutillo grant, south of the Bracito grant, in what is now Texas, was a colonization grant that was surveyed and approved in the summer of 1823. The grantees established a settlement in 1824 and commenced building an *acequia*, constructing homes and cultivating their allotments. This arrangement continued for almost a decade until the settlers were forced off their lands by Apache Indians in 1833. The Canutillo Grant remained vacant until James Magoffin unwittingly settled on the grant in 1850. He constructed a home and various other improvements and began cultivating crops.

John Russell Bartlett, the U.S. Boundary Commissioner involved in the survey of the new international border codified by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, arrived at Magoffin’s ranch in April 1851. He describes the property as an island of cultivation in an otherwise desolate landscape. Agricultural success at the ranch was far from secure. Like the settlements to the north, irrigation was a necessity and the construction of ditches was of paramount importance. Bartlett notes that Magoffin constructed a large ditch that took water from the river north of his property and carried it through his fields before retuning to the river. This was a typical *acequia madre*. When Bartlett visited the ditch was full of water and irrigation flowed to the sowed fields. However, such conditions did not remain.


The water level dropped, the ditches dried, and the crops failed. Bartlett had seen and heard of this situation occurring repeatedly in El Paso and writes "such is the uncertainty of crops in the Rio Grande [Mesilla] Valley."\textsuperscript{51}

The Commissioner was not particularly sanguine about the promise of irrigation as a tool to bring the river to productive use. He writes that “a mistaken idea prevails in regard to the great advantage of artificial irrigation” and astutely notes that irrigation was dependant on an unpredictable water supply.\textsuperscript{52} There was typically plenty of water in February and March, but by April and May the water supply diminished and became inadequate. Farmers waited expectantly for the river to rise again in late May as the melting snows of the Rocky Mountains began to make their way downstream. If the Rockies were in drought, crops failed.\textsuperscript{53} The temerity of nature, however, was not the only condition affecting the availability of water. \textit{Acequias} took much more water out of the river than they returned. The cumulative effects could be devastating. Before he ever ventured into the Mesilla Valley Bartlett noted that agriculture along the Rio Grande was so precarious that the summer of 1852 was the first year in five that farmers just south of El Paso (San Elizario) had enough water to irrigate their crops.

\textsuperscript{51} Bartlett, \textit{Personal Narrative}, Pg. 199.

\textsuperscript{52} Bartlett, \textit{Personal Narrative}, Pg. 186.

The river failed to flow in El Paso once every seven years during the late summer months of August and September. Bartlett argued that the river could barely provide enough water for use in and around El Paso and wondered what would happen as more land was placed under cultivation. After all, as another observer wrote several years later that the Rio Grande Valley “is a most fertile region” that “gloriously rewards the labor spent on irrigation.” With some alarm he wrote that more settlers “were sure to come” making an already “scant and variable supply of water” ever more scarce.54

While farmers were mindful of drought, they were more acquainted with deluge. The Rio Grande flooded regularly. Typical spring run-off damaged ditches and dams, but was manageable. On the other hand, in years of ample mountain snowfall, or heavy summer precipitation, the Rio Grande could become destructive and flood croplands, just as it did in 1828 spurring Jose Maria Costales and his fellow petitioners to establish Doña Ana. Dams were often made of crude materials, including stone, logs and mud. While these were convenient building materials, they were not durable. It was not unusual for dams to be destroyed by spring runoff or summer flash floods. Destroyed dams equated to lost water for crops. Homes that were not on high ground were also vulnerable. Lydia Spencer Lane, the wife of the commander at Fort Fillmore just south of Mesilla, writes of a flash flood in 1862 that inundated her home with three feet of water. 55

54 Bartlett, Personal Narrative, p 188; Committee on Irrigation of Arid Lands, Irrigation of Arid Lands, Pgs. 2, 3.

55 Simmons, Spanish Pathways, 133-4; Want, “Adobes of Chamberino,” 176; Lydia Spencer Lane, I Married a Soldier, or Old Days in the Old Army (Philadelphia, PA: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1893), Pg. 109.
The Rio Grande to also had the tendency change course as flood water receded. The river’s intransigence wreaked havoc in the late 1840s. Some villages south of El Paso were isolated on an island when the river channel split. Other villagers were separated from their croplands when the Rio Grande shifted course. River channel shifts could be dramatic. In 1842, a thirty mile section of Rio Grande near El Paso forged a new channel. In some areas the river moved seven miles laterally.  

Bartlett and his party left Magoffin’s ranch on April 20 and continued to Doña Ana along the Camino Real. In at least one way it was a journey of contrast. When the road veered away from the river, the landscape was arid and the soil was “gravelly.” Recalcitrant mesquite dotted an arid landscape that “is never affected by rain.” When the road approached the river, however, the soil was “not surpassed for fertility, in the world.” The land, however, was not meeting its potential. Even though large groves of cottonwood trees greeted the surveyors whenever they approached the river, Bartlett notes that rich soils of the river’s floodplain were “destitute of grass and [had] but little shrubbery” for want of water.  

Indeed, there were miles of bottomlands that were yet to be populated by farmers in 1851. 

As the party traveled up the river and into the northern reaches of the Mesilla Valley they passed through Las Cruces, the first genuine settlement on their journey from El Paso. 

---

56 Taylor and Barrick, *Wild as the West Ever Was*, Pg. 12; Committee on Irrigation of Arid Lands, *Irrigation of Arid Lands*, Pgs. 3,4.

Las Cruces, an American designed town, garnered hardly a mention by Bartlett. The town was established when some Doña Ana residents wanted to settle closer to their fields. The grant’s justice of the peace, Pablo Melenderes, approached the United States officials in 1849 and asked for assistance in laying out the town site a few miles south of Doña Ana. He was following a familiar tradition in which Hispanic settlers petitioned their government to formally establish and lay out towns just as Melenderez and his compatriots did in 1843 when they moved to the Doña Ana Bend. Army surveyors complied and designed an American style town with wide streets intersecting at ninety-degree angles. There was also a main street for businesses. However, Las Cruces also had a traditional plaza anchored by a church. In fact, for all its modern American design, the town was securely Hispanic in 1851.

Bartlett has much more to say about Doña Ana, which he describes as the fortunate site of a “broad rich valley” that residents cultivate with irrigation. The town itself was a combination of older jacals, which were structures “built of upright sticks, their interstices filled with mud,” and new adobe buildings. The new structures housed the U.S. Army (two companies) and new businesses. There is no question that Bartlett ventured into a community in transition, but it was not change that reflected progress and growth as the construction of new buildings might indicate. Instead, He describes the exodus of Doña Ana residents across the river to Mesilla. Doña Ana, a town that at one time promised to become


59 Bartlett, Personal Narrative, Pg. 212.
the most important hub in the Mesilla Valley was soon largely depopulated and eviscerated.

To be sure, the Doña Ana land grab did not prove particularly successful. Excluding the military post, in 1850 there were five residents of Doña Ana who were not from New Mexico or Mexico. Las Cruces had seven non-Hispanic residents. Ironically, Mesilla had the greatest non-Hispanic population at thirteen. Even though communities grew over the next ten years, the demographic conditions were relatively unchanged. Nearly five thousand people lived in the Mesilla Valley in 1860. Fewer than one hundred of these residents were not Hispanic. The greatest number of non-Hispanics lived in Mesilla, still the most populous community, but they still made up a tiny percentage of the local population, only about three percent. Similar demographic conditions prevailed until the 1880s. Most non-Hispanic men married Hispanic women from New Mexico or Mexico.

While speculators and interlopers were not particularly successful in wresting the Mesilla Valley from Mexicans, diplomats and imperialists were able to acquire the valley from Mexico. The Gadsden Purchase Treaty, known as El Tratado de Mesilla in Mexico, was

---


ratified in 1854 and resulted in the exchange of nearly 30,000 square miles of Mexican Territory for $10,000,000 dollars. The treaty moved the United States/Mexico border a considerable distance south of the settlements along the Rio Grande. Ostensibly, the Gadsden Purchase Treaty was an effort to overcome a conflict over the location of the border stemming from discrepancies in the maps and land descriptions used to determine the international boundary in the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. James Gadsden, the United States chief negotiator was a railroad speculator and understood that the Mesilla Valley was a highly desirable location for a transcontinental railroad. This was the most important consideration by most American supporters of the treaty.

The Gadsden Purchase, was symbolically consummated in the Mesilla plaza on November 16, 1854. On that day soldiers from nearby Fort Fillmore marched to the Mexican settlement in full dress. They entered a town was that was aflutter with activity and expectation. Their counterparts, Mexican soldiers, had already lined the southwest side of the plaza. Mexican political leaders were present among the residents of Mesilla and other regional towns who had turned out to witness the ceremonies in which General John Garland took official possession of the Mesilla Valley for the United States. With appropriate pomp and circumstance the Mexican flag that had commanded a prominent place on the plaza was lowered and the United States flag was raised. The ceremony must have been a surreal experience for some residents who had repatriated themselves to the Mesilla Valley in order to maintain Mexican citizenship. Regardless of why residents came

62 The treaty was wildly unpopular in Mexico and resulted in Santa Ana’s exile to the British Caribbean (Saint Thomas and Nassau, Bahamas).
to the settlements west of the Rio Grande, they were now clearly in United States territory. Most chose to remain. *La Enaboración de la Bandera*, or Raising of the Flag, became an annual commemoration in the Mesilla Valley.  

The sources are not explicit on why residents stayed in 1854 after they repatriated from the United States to Mexico in 1848. There were likely a multitude of reasons. It was certainly a more daunting task to relocate to Mexico now that it involved a journey of nearly fifty miles, rather than merely a ford across the Rio Grande. Residents would, moreover, have abandoned farms and a community they had developed over the previous decade. In such a scenario, attachment to place and community was probably stronger than national Mexican identity. At the same time, the proximity to Mexico allowed residents to maintain linkages with Chihuahua while remaining in New Mexico. Finally, there were no Mexican immigration agents enticing local resident to repatriate.

They may have also stayed because Mesilla was an important regional center. Mesilla forged its dominant role in the valley and quickly surpassed the towns on the east side of the Rio Grande as the most significant settlement in the region. The town became a center of commerce, transportation, and entertainment. The Camino Real, Butterfield Tail and other major and minor roads passed through or skirted near the settlements of the valley, especially Mesilla. From the beginning, Mesillarios availed themselves to the benefits of their location along these thoroughfares. Merchants easily found a place in the valley and quickly developed diverse operations. The first permanent resident on the plaza

was Mateo Guerra, a merchant who plied his wares between Santa Fe and Chihuahua.

Another resident, Blas Duran, grew wheat on his ten-acre allotment and processed the crop at his own mill before he transported the product to regional markets, such as military installations and mines. Duran's well-appointed residence became a de-facto stage stop as the merchant invariably returned to Mesilla with travelers aboard his carts. Mesillario merchants plied various wares to local rural residents with a wide variety of products, including canned food, sugar, clothing, liquor, and farm equipment. The merchants also acquired corn, wheat, forage, and beans from local farmers, either as payment for goods or through direct purchase. 64 This interaction ensured a link between the rural and more urban parts of the valley.

Agriculture remained important. An engineer surveying a wagon road through the Mesilla Valley in the late 1850s noted that the valley was extensively cultivated and that the area around Mesilla was “thickly studded with cornfields and intersected with numerous acequias [sic] and irrigating canals.” 65 Some of these farmers were growing crops for the market and shipping them along the Camino Real and other trade and travel routes. In fact, marketable crops from local farmers became more important as major markets developed in the region between the 1850s and 1870s. These included nearby military installations, such as Fort Fillmore, Fort Thorn, Fort Seldon, all of which were less than fifty miles from

64 Taylor and Barrick, Wild as the West Ever Was, 63; Scott Edward Fritz, ”Mesilla Valley Merchants, 1870-1881: History of Anglo and Hispano Involvement in the Santa Fe Trade of Southern New Mexico,” M.A. Thesis, New Mexico State University, 1997, Pg. 34, 38, 42.

Mesilla. A plethora of other military encampments located throughout the region also provided ready markets for Mesillarios crops and goods. Merchants gained access to other markets as productive mines were developed in the Silver City region and Organ Mountains. The expanding markets resulted in local farmers increasing their production of saleable crops, such as grain and forage. Merchants constructed mills to process the grain they received from farmers. Some of them also produced liquor from fruit they grew on their own farms.66

Twenty-Five merchants were operating in Mesilla in 1860. They consolidated their operations along a single block south of the plaza. The corrals, storerooms, and sometimes, homes of diverse group of merchants with such surnames as Armijo, St. Vrain, Maurin, Leonart, Hoppin, and Appel. Hispanics represented least one-half of the merchants in the Las Cruces/Mesilla area in the first decades of settlement. Many of these merchants were from influential Mexican and New Mexico families. Other merchants included Europeans who had relatively recently immigrated to the United States. They tended to be from poor family backgrounds. Merchants from the United States were from more affluent backgrounds. Regardless of their initial social stature, many of the merchants became prominent valley citizens. For example, one of the Las Cruces merchants Martin Amador, was a young man who had emigrated to Doña Ana in 1846 with his widowed mother. He transformed his mother’s store into a multifaceted mercantile enterprise that lasted long

66 Darlis A. Miller, Soldiers and Settlers: Military Supply in the Southwest, 1861-1885 (Albuquerque, NM.: University of New Mexico Press, 1989, Pg. 86; Taylor and Barrick, Wild as the West Ever Was, Pg. 63; Fritz, “Mesilla Valley Merchants,” Pgs. 34, 38, 46. In addition to local and regional markets, trade networks extended south to Ciudad Chihuahua and east to Kansas City, San Antonio, and St Louis.
after his death. The Amadors became one of the most important families in the Mesilla Valley.

The transport and mercantile businesses begat other institutions, especially in Mesilla. There was a diversity of businesses on and near the plaza by the early 1860s. Joshua Sledd ran a billiard hall that sold a wide variety of refreshments and exotic foods. Customers could dine on everything from lobsters to pineapple while imbibing from a selection of wines and liquors purchased at a store owned by Nestor Varela. The Barela family owned a store on the plaza. There was a Hispano owned wine shop at the south end of the plaza. A German Bakery, Frietze and Appleozer, sold baked goods. Sam Bean owned a hotel and bar that served weary travelers. A lawyer, W Claude Jones, and a physician, M.H. Macwillie had offices in Mesilla. Even with the presence of Euro-American owned businesses, the culture of Mesilla and the other communities in the Mesilla Valley was largely Mexican. Men like Joshua Sledd, and Sam Bean, married Mexican women, became (or were) Catholic, and raised their children speaking Spanish.

Anglo-Hispanic intermarriage was relatively common in nineteenth century New Mexico among all social classes. Merchants were particularly apt to marry into Hispanic families. The Mesilla Valley merchants married into prominent Mexican and New Mexican


families partly as a way to tap into regional networks of influence. Some Nuevomexicanos, on the other hand, understood intermarriage as a vehicle for upward mobility. The Hispanic wives, however, usually embraced an incomplete acculturation. While they adopted many external social norms of their Anglo husbands, the women often continued to practice the Hispanic social and folk traditions. 69

The Mesilla plaza was a cultural and political center. A racially and socially diverse group of residents descended on the plaza in evenings. 70 Historians Mary Daniels Taylor and Norma Barrick write that one could find “men in wide brimmed hats and jeans” alongside “men in top hats with canes” and working class men in huaraches and sombreros. Women in “hoop skirts and lace bonnets” mingled with “Mexican women in wide skirts and

69 Fritz, “Mesilla Valley Merchants,” Pg. 31; Darlis A. Miller, “ Cross-Cultural Marriages in the Southwest: The New Mexico Experience,” in New Mexico Women: Intercultural Perspectives (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), Pgs. 98, 100-1, 108-10; Andrés Reséndez makes similar conclusions for the period before 1850. See Reséndez, Changing National Identities, Pgs. 129-34, 144-5. These phenomena were not unique to the Mesilla Valley. Geographer, Richard L. Norstrand notes that, by 1900, Non-Hispanic men had settled in almost every New Mexico town and village. These men almost always married into the Hispanic social structure. Acculturation occurred along two axes. Non-Hispanic residents were somewhat hispanicized, while Hispanics were incompletely Anglicized. Norstrand notes that the ultimate effect of intermarriage and intercultural contact was biculturalism, especially among Hispanics in New Mexico See Richard L. Norstrand, The Hispano Homeland (Norman, OK.: University of Oklahoma Press, 1992), Pgs. 112, 129-30.

70 Other historians have noted the multi-cultural nature of the Los Angeles Plaza in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. See Mark Wild, Street Meeting: Multiethnic Neighborhoods in Early Twentieth-Century Los Angeles (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005) and William D. Estrada, The Los Angeles Plaza: Sacred and Contested Space (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 2008).
rebozos."71 Men and boys who still had energy after a day working in the fields, artisan shops, or other establishments gathered in rebo te courts to play hand ball. Other men and women leisurely rode their horses and mules along the roads of the town. "72 Quiet evenings were complemented by fiestas and other celebrations that attracted Anglo and Hispanic residents of Mesilla and nearby towns, and visitors from Tucson, El Paso, Chihuahua and other regional centers.

Mexican and United States independence were celebrated on the plaza. Mexican Independence festivities spanned two days, September 15 and September 16. The first day of the fiesta was rather informal. Much of the plaza would have been roped off and decorated in preparation for a bullfight, but there was still space for stalls hosting games of chance. Perhaps the most popular of these games was chusas. Similar to roulette, players bought colored balls and placed bets on where the balls would come to rest. Other stalls sold tacos, enchiladas, fresh tortillas, and sweets. As evening approached, the plaza was transformed. Benches set up near a bandstand beckoned residents, Hispanic and Non-Hispanic, to gather and listen to music, dance, and sing. Orators might praise Mexican Independence. Audience members were encouraged to recite any patriotic verse or songs they had prepared. September 16 dawned with a raising of the Mexican Flag, more

71 Taylor and Barrick, Wild as the West Ever Was, Pg. 115; Griggs, Mesilla Valley, Pgs. 91, 93.

72 Taylor and Barrick, Wild as the West Ever Was, Pg. 116.
speeches, and finally, a bullfight.\textsuperscript{73} Regrettably, there is no surviving record of what was said at these early celebrations of Mexican Independence in the Mesilla Valley. Moreover, there is no way to know how, or if, the celebrations changed after Mesilla became part of the United States in 1854. There is little question, however, that for some residents they were an affirmation of Mexican identity. Residents also gathered to commemorate U.S. independence on the Fourth of July. The 1871 celebration included a ritualized raising of the American flag. The Grand Army of the Republic, a fraternal organization of Union veterans of the Civil War, played a visible role in the ceremonies, which included the firing of a cannon for each state in the Union and the reading of the Declaration of Independence in both Spanish and English. Mexican artisans provided fireworks to further liven up the holiday.\textsuperscript{74} No doubt, the ubiquitous games of chance and a diversity of food accompanied the patriotic display.

Regionally important religious fiestas punctuated much of the winter beginning with the fiesta celebrating the Virgin de Guadalupe on December 12 and culminating with the Fiesta de San Albino, the patron saint of the town, on March 2. Each celebration hosted bullfights, street fairs, food and other diversions. Local residents and visitors took part.\textsuperscript{75}


\textsuperscript{74} A similar celebration was held in Las Cruces. Taylor and Barrick, \textit{Wild as the West Ever Was}, Pgs. 151-152.

\textsuperscript{75} Lane, \textit{I Married a Soldier} 107, Taylor and Barrick, \textit{Wild as the West Ever Was}, Pg. 139; Griggs, \textit{Mesilla Valley}, Pg. 96.
Leisure time on the plaza might have allowed local farmers, many of whom lived near the city center, to forget about the unpredictable river that provided a tenuous sustenance.

The plaza was important, but the link between community and river was indelible. As discussed above, the Rio Grande continually influenced the development of the Mesilla Valley. Indeed, the establishment of a settlement was contingent on the development of irrigation. The river, on the other hand, had the power to undermine the settlers’ most valiant efforts. This became apparent in the 1860s when the Rio Grande became particularly unruly. It regularly left its banks and shifted course. As the river rampaged through the valley during the spring floods of 1862 and 1863, it washed away crops, fields, *acequias*, even homes and entire settlements. The residents of Santo Tomas and other farming communities south of Mesilla and Las Cruces fled to high ground. They established new towns at Chamberino, San Miguel, and La Union. Receding flood waters left a landscape that was so transformed that some residents found it easier to relocate to new communities on both the east and west sides of the river.\(^76\) The river flooded again in the spring of 1864. This time, instead of a torrent, the flood was intermittent. Farmers, who could, planted crops, but the river still rearranged the landscape and the people on the land. Mesillarios lost homes and livelihoods and communal ejido lands were inundated. Entire towns, such as Picacho and Nombre de Dios respectively located to the north and

south of Mesilla, were washed away.\textsuperscript{77} The floods triggered an exodus from the Mesilla Valley to Chihuahua. Other residents relocated to establish a settlement nearly one hundred miles to the east along the Tularosa River as it exited the Sacramento Mountains.\textsuperscript{78}

At the same time there was an influx of Mexican settlers from the El Paso area and Mexico into the Mesilla Valley, especially to the towns of Las Cruces, Mesilla, and La Mesa.\textsuperscript{79} Nuevomexicanos who became disillusioned by the erratic Rio Grande were replaced with Mexican who were disillusioned by the political capriciousness of their leaders. The new valley residents came from Chihuahua, Jalisco, and Coahuila.

Perhaps the most emblematic outcome of the floods of the 1860s was the fact that after the river’s fit of tumult, residents of Mesilla found themselves on the east side of the Rio Grande. The river no longer separated Mesilla, the Mexicanized town, from Las Cruces, the Americanized town. Instead of choosing isolation, residents decided to foster increased

\textsuperscript{77} Taylor and Barrick, \textit{Wild as the West Ever Was}, 105; Want, “Adobes of Chamberino,“ Pg. 173.

\textsuperscript{78} Taylor and Barrick, \textit{Wild as the West Ever Was}, Pg. 170.

\textsuperscript{79} La Mesa was established on public domain the 1857 by Hispanic residents of the Mesilla and Santo Tomás de Yturbi grants who were unable to acquire good land within the grants. The La Mesa settlement resulted in controversy because in order to irrigate their fields the settlers had to dig an acequia that crossed the José Manuel Sánchez Baca Grant. Baca refused to grant a right of way across his land. The La Mesa colonists even offered to buy the grant, but Baca still refused. Conditions deteriorated to the point that the La Mesa settlers asked the United States Attorney for New Mexico to file a protest against confirmation of the Baca Grant. As a result Baca relented and not only allowed the ditch to cross his property, but agreed to sell all his land except for 250 acres that he was farming, to the trustees of La Mesa for 3,000 sacks of corn. La mesa settlers quickly appropriated allotments in the Baca Grant. They also established the town of San Miguel on the former Baca grant. Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pgs. 35-6.
interaction. Indeed, separation was never the community norm. The sifting river just allowed for greater integration. A committee of five men, Anastacio Sisneros, Anastacio Garcia, Pablo Alvarado, Daniel Frietze and Thomas Massie, began surveying, planning, and constructing a substantial road from the Mesilla plaza to the Las Cruces plaza. The route is telling. Plazas continued to anchor the communities even as the river and residents moved.

This is, in part, due to the fact that plazas in the Mesilla Valley, as public spaces, were not merely social spaces. They were important political centers that attracted diverse groups. Crisis in 1870, for example, triggered political mobilization that began on valley plazas. Anglo settlers were moving into the valley and claiming lands within the Mesilla and Refugio grants. Hispanic residents grew alarmed and held public meetings the plazas of Mesilla and La Union, a settlement on the Refugio Grant. Juan Simon Enriques, a local farmer stood up at the La Union meeting and urged his compatriots to protect their lands by legally recording their deeds. The group elected another local man, José Mariá Garcia, to act as the settlement’s commissioner and gave him the authority to appropriate vacant lands within the grant. Other commissioners were tasked with various duties including, the creation of a register of property owners and the formalizing of streets and alleys. The public meeting in Mesilla, held April 13, 1870, resulted in the formation of a commission of leading Hispanic and Euro-American citizens. Pablo Melenderez, the first Justice of the Peace in Doña Ana and current probate judge was joined on the commission by John

---

80 Lane, I Married a Soldier, Pg. 107; Taylor and Barrick, Wild as the West Ever Was, Pg. 116.
Lemmon and Daniel Frietze, J.D. Bail, N.D. Bennett, Cristóbal Ascarate, Thomas J. Bull, and Ygnacio Orrantia. Unable to get a proper survey of the lands in the Mesilla Valley, the commissioners levied a tax on each landowner in proportion to the land they owned in order to complete the survey themselves. At least one newspaper published in Spanish implored legitimate residents to legally register their lands.

Some Mesillarios reluctantly put their faith in local politics and entered a political maelstrom that would eventually polarize the Mesilla Valley so dramatically that it would lead to the death of several men, including John Lemmon, a local Republican leader, merchant, and ally of the local Hispanic community. Lemmon was killed in a riot that broke out between Republican and Democratic party leaders on the Mesilla plaza during the summer of 1871. The clash was tied to the bitter 1871 campaign for territorial delegate to the United States Congress. The incumbent Republican, Colonel José Francisco Chavez, a Union veteran, was running against a Democratic challenger, Jose M. Gallegos, who had served as territorial delegate from 1853 to 1855. Gallegos, a former priest, had a long history of opposition to American rule. Both candidates arrived in Mesilla to speak at separate rallies on August 27, 1871. It was apparent from the beginning that this would not be a typical campaign stop. The political discord was palpable. Rally organizers originally planned a debate, but neither party could agree on terms. Instead, each group held it own rally lubricated with free whiskey. The Democrats congregated on the plaza and

81 Most of these men were prominent in Mesilla. Orrantia was an important merchant from Chamberino, a settlement south of Mesilla.

82 Bowden, Land Grants, Pg. 28; Borderer, March 15, 1871.
Republicans met nearby in front of John Lemmon’s house. The rallies were uneventful, but once the political speeches concluded, Republicans descended on the plaza bearing arms and looking for a fight. The groups faced and taunted each other until Apolonio Barela, a Democrat, fired a shot in the air triggering an eight-hour riot that convulsed the community.

Poisonous politics appear to be the most likely explanation for the riot. The Civil War was not a distant memory. Some local Republicans served the union as members of the California Column and Democrats included southern sympathizers in their ranks. Mesilla, moreover, was occupied by Confederate troops for a short time during the war. Animosity ran high. Race, to be sure, may have been a contributing factor, but racial tension was not overt. Both parties courted Hispanic support and counted Hispanics among their candidates and local party leadership.

Death and destruction were the most evident results of the August conflict, but the tense political climate reflected by the riot also triggered migrations. Some residents, including Apolonio Barela, moved back to Mexico and where they established a colony at Ascension, Chihuahua. At least one Euro-American, Fred Buckner, emigrated to Asension. Local Democrats, whose candidate went on to win the election for territorial delegate, including several prominent Hispanics, characterized the emigration to Ascension as a Republican exodus. They neglected to notice that Barlea, one of their own, was living in
Asension. Other residents relocated to Tularosa, the Silver City area, and other settlements in the borderland region.\textsuperscript{83}

Those who remained continued to press their rights to land and livelihood. Farmers and merchants met publically on local plazas to express their concerns and develop plans to protect their property. The Mexican and American Mesillarios employed a time honored practice. They petitioned the government for redress. The residents of the Mesilla Civil Colony Grant started the process. More than one thousand residents of the grant petitioned the Surveyor General of New Mexico for confirmation of the grant and title under the land laws of the United States in January 1874. Those living on the Doña Ana Bend Grant also filed a petition with the General Land Office shortly thereafter. Farmers and other inhabitants living on the Refugio Grant followed suit and filed a petition with the Surveyor General on February 2, 1874, requesting that validation of their grant. James K. Proudfit, the Surveyor General, established the legitimacy of the Mesilla Grant on February 12, 1874. He affirmed the validity of the Don Ana Bend Colony Grant on March 31, 1874 and verified the legality of the Refugio Grant on May 18, 1874. The Surveyor General recommended that Congress confirm all three grants.\textsuperscript{84}

\textsuperscript{83} Taylor and Barrick, \textit{Wild as the West Ever Was}, Pgs. 142-3; Anderson, \textit{History of New Mexico}, Pg. 567.

\textsuperscript{84} Bowden, \textit{Land Grants}, Pgs. 28, 52, 69; James K. Proudfit, “Opinion of the Surveyor General, February 12, 1874” and Proudfit, “Civil Colony of Refugio. Decision. May 18, 1874” in \textit{Senate Senate Executive Documents}, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 56, Pgs. 35; 60; Proudfit, “Doña Ana Bend Grant: Opinion, March 31, 1874,” in \textit{Senate Senate Executive Documents}, 43\textsuperscript{rd} Cong., 1\textsuperscript{st} Sess., Document Number 43, Pg. 87. Congress did not readily follow Proudfit’s recommendations and the grants remained in limbo until the 1890s.
In the meantime, the Mesilla Valley continued to attract, mostly Hispanic, settlers throughout the 1870s. Mesilla remained dominant as a center of transportation and trade and became the locus of government. In addition to being the Doña Ana county seat, the town of whitewashed adobe was the headquarters of the third judicial district and the regional General Land Office of the United States. Longstanding linkages between the farm and town remained. Merchants relied on local farmers as customers and suppliers. Many farmers and merchants lived near the town center and it is not surprising that many of these selfsame residents visited the Mesilla plaza for leisure, meetings, and ritual. The plazas of towns like La Mesa, La Union, and Las Cruces also attracted local denizens seeking entertainment, representation, and edification.

Indeed, the trends that shaped the initial settlement of Doña Ana continued to influence life in the Mesilla Valley at the end of the 1870s. The Rio Grande remained a ubiquitous force that affected the daily life of residents in a variety of ways. Farmers contended with floods and drought. In normal years, they cleaned, rebuilt, modified, and repaired acequias and other irrigation features that the river silted in, tore asunder, made obsolete, or just plain wore out. The men, under the leadership of respected mayordomos they had elected earlier in the year, also removed weeds and other unwanted vegetation from the ditches in the hopes that everything would work out and they would get enough water for a good crop. There were also years that required more dramatic responses. Floods caused both temporary and permanent abandonment of fields, homes, and communities. In response, Mesillaros moved themselves and their families to new

---

85 Anderson, History of New Mexico, Pg. 565.
settlements on higher ground or they relocated to communities in Chihuahua, Mexico, and New Mexico’s Mimbres and Tularosa Valleys. Some of these residents returned to the Mesilla Valley; but many did not. New settlers, mostly from Mexico, filled the void created by those who left. This mobility was nothing new. It characterized the communities of the Mesilla Valley since the establishment of Doña Ana.

There is little question that the Rio Grande provided a major influence on the settlement and development of the Mesilla Valley, but the presence of major travel and trade routes, from the Camino Real to the Butterfield Stage, shaped communities in two important ways. No doubt, the routes facilitated the regional mobility of residents. The roads, moreover, ensured that even though the region was rural, it was not isolated. Mesilla Valley residents were trading with travelers as early as 1843; and by the 1860s mercantile and related enterprises were firmly entrenched in population centers, especially Mesilla. The merchants served to ensure connections between the farm village and plaza. They purchased crops from and sold, or traded, goods to farmers. Some merchants also had their own farms. Many became community leaders.

Like their counterparts who originally settled Doña Ana, residents expressed and protected their interests through public meeting and petition. While most of the residents did not have a direct voice, they appointed commissions who they felt served their interests. These commissioners were often the merchants and businessmen who the residents interacted with and who owned enterprises on and near the plazas. These men were certainly not always Hispanic, but they were at least somewhat Hispanicized. Indeed, in 1880, the Mesilla Valley had a regional identity that was a strongly Hispanic, or even
Mexican, in which people spoke Spanish more often than English. The region was also multicultural. After all, Mexican and American national holidays were celebrated by a ethnically mixed group. The valley was also a place where the mayordomo-centered water democracies were the core political and social component in the management of water. Finally, there was little division between the farm and the town where the plaza was the center of business, politics, and leisure. It was a region in which communities were shaped by the unpredictable Rio Grande River that bisected the Mesilla Valley. A water crisis precipitated by development in Colorado led to federal reclamation, which eventually made the river more predictable. Engineers, however, had to contend with many local residents who were unwilling or unable to divorce themselves from the social and cultural norms that developed in the valley in the nineteenth century.
Map 2: Hispanic Land Grants: Northern Half of the Mesilla Valley
Map 3: Hispanic Land Grants: Southern Half of the Mesilla Valley
Map 4: Mesilla Valley Communities
Chapter 2: The Valley in Crisis

There were few more powerful forces for change in the western United States than the railroad. Trains begat mobility that led to migrations that structured community and environment.¹ The Mesilla Valley was not isolated from this phenomenon. The farming communities that straddled the Rio Grande were initially affected by railroad speculation. As noted in the previous chapter, the Gadsden Purchase, was largely the result of speculation centering on the development of a southern route for a transcontinental railroad. With the purchase, Mexican communities, like Mesilla, suddenly became part of the United States. The Gadsden Purchase, however, did not challenge local centers of influence, or the way most residents lived their lives on a day-to-day basis. The international border moved, but the farmers and merchants maintained their social and economic lives.

The arrival of the Denver and Rio Grande Railway hundreds of miles away in Colorado's San Luis Valley was not so innocuous. The first train rolled into the station in Alamosa, Colorado on July 6, 1878. A few years later, the line was extended across the San Luis Valley to Antonito and south into northern New Mexico. The transformations triggered

by this event had a dramatic, albeit indirect effect on the lives of many New Mexico farmers.

The railroad restructured the isolated San Luis Valley. An 1877 Rocky Mountain News column anticipating the arrival of rail traffic to the valley noted that the railroad would result in the “up-springing of a magic city somewhere in the San Luis Valley.”

The magic city did not materialize, but the fertile soil that the columnist mentioned in passing, coupled with the promise of irrigated agriculture and a rail link to larger markets did reshape the San Luis Valley. Promoters and speculators wasted little time in pursuing their visions of a robust landscape peopled by successful farmers. Local and regional newspapers effusively described the agricultural potential of the valley as early as 1874, but it was not until the railroad arrived that large-scale development occurred.

The San Luis valley had a resident population of mostly Hispanic farmers practicing irrigated agriculture and ranching before 1878, but settlement promoters aspired for a vast migration of non-Hispanic farmers to the San Luis Valley. They courted hopeful transplants from neighboring states such as Utah and New Mexico, the Eastern and Midwestern United States, and Europe.

2 [No Title], *Rocky Mountain News*, April 4, 1877.


The promotion of the valley had important implications for local demographics and race relations, but the anticipated flood of settlers never arrived. Non-Hispanic residency was more modest than speculators had hoped and by 1892 new community and farm development became stagnant. The settlement schemes, nevertheless, led to a prolonged water famine along the Rio Grande in New Mexico, parts of west Texas, and the Mexican state of Chihuahua. The Mesilla Valley was the epicenter of this drought manufactured by development in Colorado.

An extensive network of irrigation ditches were planned and put into service in the San Luis Valley to serve promotion, speculation, and settlement. In 1880, shortly after the


6 I use the term “water famine” to describe the conditions that predominated in the Mesilla Valley during an extended period of dryness that resulted in the Rio Grande regularly running dry. Water, in an agricultural community, is pivotal in nourishing not only crops but local community development. Therefore, the lack of water can be equated to a famine. “Water famine” is often used in conjunction with the term “manufactured drought”. I use the term, as opposed to just “drought” to mean that the lack of water in the Mesilla Valley was the product of man-made impoundments and development in the upper reaches of the Rio Grande Watershed. There is little information about whether local residents perceived the drought as the result of development in Colorado or just another turn in the capriciousness of the river.
railroad arrived, there were 668 irrigation ditches in the San Luis Valley. Most of these ditches were fairly small and associated with Hispanic settlements that pre-dated the arrival of the railroad. The arrival of non-Hispanic settlers and speculators resulted in a steady expansion of irrigation in the 1880s. Within ten years of the arrival of the railroad, there were over 1,000 ditches in the valley taking water out of the Rio Grande. These new ditches, moreover, were larger and held a greater capacity of water. They typically stretched 30-40 miles north and south of the Rio Grande. A contemporary observer called them “monster ditches,” and noted that between 1880 and 1890 numerous such structures were constructed in the San Luis Valley. Associated laterals covered the entire western half of the valley with a network of secondary and tertiary ditches. Promoters approached irrigation development with delusional optimism. For example, in 1887, the Taos Valley Company proposed a canal 125 miles long, 65 feet wide and 8 feet deep to get water to its planned settlement. While the number of acres irrigated increased from just over 130,000 acres to 217,000 acres between 1880 and 1900, the amount of water used essentially tripled from 509,000 acre feet to 1,589,000 acre feet. An 1891 Denver Daily News article proudly proclaimed the San Luis Valley the most irrigated region in Colorado.\footnote{Follett, “Study of the Use of Water for Irrigation,” Pg. 26; James A. French, “Hydrographic Survey of the Rio Grande Drainage Basin and San Luis Valley Colorado,” 1910, Pg 124, Box 16: Folder: 262-D13 Report of the Central Board of Review on the Rio Grande Project, Entry 4, Records of the Bureau of Reclamation, Record Group 115 (hereafter referred to as RG 115), National Archives at Denver (hereafter referred to as NARA-DEN); [No Title] Rocky Mountain News, July 1, 1888; “Topics for Farmers,” Rocky Mountain News, March 9, 1891.} This trend was unsustainable.
The expansion of irrigation was dramatic and Colorado farmers and speculators were pushing the Rio Grande to its limit. In fact, in 1879, a comparison of acres of land irrigated by the Rio Grande in Colorado and New Mexico revealed that the latter state accounted for a significant majority of the total acres irrigated. Six years later conditions had shifted. Colorado and New Mexico each irrigated about 150,000 acres with the river's water. By 1892, framers in the San Luis Valley were irrigating twice as many acres as farmers along the entire Rio Grande drainage in New Mexico. This change was largely due to the expansion of irrigation in Colorado. The total number of acres irrigated in New Mexico did not change dramatically between 1879 and 1892. New Mexico farmers were cultivating approximately 150,000 to 180,000 acres throughout this period.\footnote{W.W. Follett, “Irrigation on the Rio Grande, A Paper Written for Presentation at the Irrigation Congress in Albuquerque, New Mexico September 29 to October 3, 1908,” Pgs. 8-9; Box 798, Folder 253-4 Rio Grande Project Miscellaneous International (Water) Comm. Reports of, etc, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN.}

Development in Colorado was devastating in New Mexico. Hydrologist James French noted that prior to 1885 the Rio Grande was a perennial stream below Albuquerque New Mexico. After 1885 the river became intermittent through southern New Mexico, including the Mesilla Valley, well into Texas. He asserted that the lack of water was directly associated with the large-scale development of irrigation in Colorado.\footnote{Follett, “Irrigation on the Rio Grande,” Pg. 4; French, “Rio Grande Drainage Basin,” Pg. 126.} W.W. Follett, an engineer employed with the International Boundary and Water Commission, was more direct in his assertions. In a series of detailed studies beginning in 1896, Follett points out that even though the Rio Grande had been unpredictable prior to 1885 there were only
rare occasions when the river ran dry. Follett notes that the river failed to flow for a short period two times prior to 1880 and that there was only one crop failure, which occurred in 1861. The situation changed dramatically in the second half of the 1880s. Farmers in the Mesilla Valley were greeted with a dry riverbed for three months in 1887. The next year, the river failed to carry water into the Mesilla Valley for five or six months. Significant periods of time when the river was dry became the norm in succeeding years. The river was often underwhelming even in March when flows should have been high. On 11 March 1897, the Dona Ana County Republican newspaper reported that the raging Rio Grande was “not raging very much.” Crop failures occurred with alarming consistency. Conditions deteriorated to the point that there were crop failures for six successive years between 1899 and 1904. Farmers were demoralized and frustrated.\footnote{Follett, “Irrigation on the Rio Grande,” Pgs. 4-5, 7; [No Title], \textit{Don Ana County Republican}, March 11, 1897.}

Most farms in the Mesilla Valley were small. In good years, the majority of farmers grew crops for subsistence with any excess sold or traded. In bad years, this difficult existence became considerably more tenuous. As a result of the continual water shortages, cropped areas in the Mesilla Valley shrunk dramatically.\footnote{Follett, “Irrigation on the Rio Grande,” Pg. 7.} According to the 1880 United States Agricultural census, there were 431 farms operating in Dona Ana County. Most farms were in the Mesilla Valley where 31,000 acres were under cultivation. Individual farms tended to be fairly small, between 10 and 100 acres, and located along the Rio Grande in the Mesilla Valley. Ten years later there were just three hundred farms in the entire county.
Two hundred seventy-five of them were located in the Mesilla Valley and, just upstream, in the sparsely populated Rincon Valley. These valley farmers were irrigating 11,000 acres of improved cropland. Typical individual farm acreage was unchanged. Average farm size was 40 acres, slightly above the state average, but still quite small. The number of farms in Dona Ana County by 1900 had risen to 571, but the average farm size had decreased and there was a marked increase in the number of farms of less than ten acres. Total county-wide acreage in farms was still lower than it was in 1880.  

Since most farming occurred in the Mesilla Valley, it is clear that valley farmers were either unable or unwilling to increase farm production in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. The majority of farmers were not prosperous. Even though cultivation continued during the manufactured drought, the difficulty acquiring water made farming less secure. Acres under ditch began to decline after 1880 and there was a dramatic decrease from almost 28,000 acres served by ditches in 1884 to just over 22,000 acres served in 1885. The acres served by ditches hovered near 22,000 acres for the next five

years before gradually increasing to 27,000 by 1896. While acres served by ditch does not directly reflect cultivation, there is a clear correlation. The Piccaho ditch, which was abandoned in 1880, resulted in 2,500 acres of land taken out of cultivation and in the mid-1880s when acres under ditch were at their lowest, 9,500 acres of land served by the Las Cruces ditch were taken out of cultivation. Ditches and sections of ditches were abandoned during the water famine because they became unusable or inefficient due to lack of water. This, in turn, resulted in decreased cultivation.

Statistics, while informative, fail to put a human face on the water famine in the Mesilla Valley. Numbers do not reveal how the landscape and local communities were affected by the lack of water. Luckily, Monsignor Henry Granjon, the Catholic Bishop of Tucson, made a pastoral visit to the Mesilla Valley in May 1902. The Bishop was one of a group of French priests who ministered to the mostly Hispanic communities in the Southwest in the last half of the nineteenth century. Granjon wrote an account of his journey among and between local communities that provides a vivid picture of life in the Mesilla Valley during the six years of successive crop failure that Follett enumerated in his


15 The Tucson Catholic Diocese was formed in 1897 and included all of New Mexico and Arizona. The Mesilla Valley fell under the newly formed El Paso Diocese in 1914 and in 1982 became part of the Las Cruces Diocese when it was established.
reports. The journal, originally written in French, was published in a Catholic periodical, *La Missions Catholiques* that chronicled the missionary efforts of Catholic priests. Granjon was a particularly astute observer of the Mesilla Valley because he had a keen interest in flora, landscape, and natural history. He also had a deep knowledge of, and interest in, Spanish heritage and Hispanic communities.16

Granjon’s route paralleled the Rio Grande south of Rincon, New Mexico, a community up river from the Mesilla Valley. In his journal he notes that the riverbed, shrouded with tall trees is “almost dry everywhere.” The dry river and drought were dominant themes in his narrative. The Bishop writes that the riverbed at the south end of the valley was “indicated only by sands in a large depression in the soil.” A lack of significant flow in the Rio Grande in early May was not unheard of, even before development in the San Luis Valley. Traditionally, valley farmers relied on an abundance of water from February until April or early May when flows dropped too low for effective irrigation. The river, fed by spring runoff from the mountains of Colorado and Northern New Mexico, would swell again in late May. By late summer the flow might again be too low for effective irrigation. Water development on the San Luis Valley exacerbated these conditions. A intermittently low river became a regularly dry river. The striking element of Granjon’s observations is the implication that the dry river had not recently carried any appreciable flow. The Monsignor writes that the river is dry often enough that it “serves as

a road for vehicles."  

The Rio Grande was truly a river of sand much of the year; the repercussions of which emanated into the fields and communities that depended on its water.

Drought conjures images of bleakness and desolation. Such impressions are hasty. The valley was not a wasteland. Cultivation continued. Granjon, viewing the Mesilla Valley from an elevated vantage in Las Cruces, describes green alfalfa fields "unfurl[ing] as far as the eye can see." He notes that orchards were interspersed among the fields. Moreover, during his journey he writes of the green fields just outside Mesilla and tours the fairly successful farm of an Anthony, New Mexico resident he describes only as an Americanized farmer named Don Pancho. The farmer had a healthy vineyard, orchard, and "vast fields of alfalfa."  

Before the 1880s, farms typically consisted of diversified combinations of vegetable crops that included chile, onions, tomatoes, garlic, corn, lentils, beans, squash, and melons. Orchards and vineyards complimented the vegetable crops either at the farm or home site. The vegetable and fruit crops were usually supplemented with grain crops. Crops that were not destined for home use were traded or sold in regional markets. The market for grain was particularly strong before the arrival of the railroad in 1881. Mesilla merchants enjoyed a robust trade with nearby military reservations.  


undermined by the arrival of the railroad and the fact that regional forts began using the railroad to acquire supplies, including grains, from other sources. Many farmers reacted by reducing acreage planted in grain crops. The water famine, however, had a greater effect on crops than did the loss of marketing opportunities.

Alfalfa became an important crop in the Mesilla Valley by the late 1880s when the agricultural communities along the Rio Grande were in the grips of drought. While there is evidence the crop was planted, perhaps by Non-Hispanic settlers, as early as 1870, there is no indication that it was more than a minor crop prior to the drought. Farmers in Dona Ana County planted, at the most, 420 acres of alfalfa in 1880. Ten years later, alfalfa occupied 2,000 acres of county cropland, most in the Mesilla Valley. The acreage of alfalfa grown in 1890 approximated that planted in wheat and corn, two crops traditionally grown in the valley. Clearly, farmers were significantly expanding acreage planted in alfalfa by the 1890s. By 1900 alfalfa was growing on 6,000 acres across Dona Ana County. Again most of this acreage was located in the Mesilla Valley. Also, by the end of the nineteenth century, land dedicated to alfalfa far outstripped that on which corn or wheat was planted.  

There are two reasons for the dramatic increase in the cultivation of alfalfa. The first is the simple fact that there was a robust market for alfalfa to which farmers were not

20 Alfalfa is not specifically mentioned in the 1880 Agricultural Census (though there is a notation classifying 420 acres as grassland in Dona Ana County that was mown for hay.); Census Office, *Productions of Agriculture 1880*, Table 19.

blind. Local farmers had been marketing and bartering crops since the 1840s. By the 1860s, they grew grains, partly because there was a market for them. When the locally based grain trade evaporated with the arrival of the railroad, farmers began planting alfalfa which was used locally, sold in local and regional markets, or shipped farther afield by rail.22

The more important reason for the late 1880s shift to alfalfa, however, is ecological. Unlike vegetable and grain and forage crops, alfalfa is a perennial. A member of the pea family (fabaceae) alfalfa, once sowed, projects a strong deep taproot. This root can drive up to thirty feet into the subsoil in search of water. This allows the crop to survive prolonged dry periods. For this reason alfalfa varieties are extremely drought tolerant. In years when crops of corn and wheat were a complete loss, a farmer could still bring in a crop of alfalfa with a little water. If no water is available the alfalfa survives in dormancy to grow again without replanting. The practical utility of alfalfa as a crop was clear to many residents. Even in the dry years, Mesilla Valley farmers were able to get up to six cuttings of hay. Each acre of alfalfa yielded an average of 3-4 tons of hay each year. In the 1890s baled hay sold for four dollars per ton. By 1902 farmers were able to get $12-$18 per ton. Therefore, an acre of alfalfa produced an income of up to 72 dollars. The deep roots of the alfalfa plant certainly kept some farmers from losing their land and livelihoods.23

The ubiquity of alfalfa in the Mesilla Valley was both a function of the human caused drought that local residents were suffering through and the economic changes brought by


23 Barker, Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley, Pgs. 13, 43; Granjon, Along the Rio Grande, Pg. 43.
the railroad in Colorado. Farmers who endeavored to keep their land reacted to changes in the environment and market by shifting some of the crops they chose to grow. Farmers were not merely growing crops in order to keep themselves out of the market, but were growing crops to ensure their own survival as farmers. Even the farmland associated with the San Albino Catholic church in Mesilla was affected by this phenomenon. Formerly a vineyard, the land was converted, by 1902, to an alfalfa field.24

Alfalfa, with its deep roots hidden from sight, gave an illusion of fecundity that belied the fact that families and communities in the Mesilla Valley were suffering. After leaving Las Cruces, Bishop Granjon traveled to Mesilla, a “sad little town.” Here he began to witness the fundamental ways that the drought undermined local communities. He describes a population “thrown into misery.” The once proud town was overgrown with weeds. Many businesses enterprises had moved to Las Cruces, or ceased to operate. Once productive fields lay fallow. Abandoned homes and gardens were “everywhere.” The vacant homes were the artifacts of a once vibrant town undermined by economic change and eviscerated by drought. Granjon also notes that a significant migration of Mexicans out of the valley was in process. 25

Residents were not just leaving Mesilla. Out-migration was occurring valley-wide. Due to a lack of documentation, it is quite difficult to trace the corridors of migration from the Mesilla Valley. Some residents moved from the agricultural villages to nearby towns,

24 Granjon, Along the Rio Grande, Pg 51.

such as Las Cruces and El Paso in search of work. Some probably returned to Mexico. Others moved to the mining or agricultural centers of Arizona, New Mexico and Colorado.26 There is evidence that residents followed established migratory traditions and relocated to new settlements along the Rio Grande. In 1892, farmers living in the lower end of the Mesilla Valley grew frustrated and disillusioned by the lack of water and continued crop failures. They began moving about forty miles up-river to cultivate the sparsely settled valleys north of Rincon, New Mexico.27 Settlers constructed a ditch and cleared enough bosque28 to plant crops. The pioneering farmers produced their first harvest in 1893. Meanwhile, settlers from the Mesilla Valley continued to move to the Rincon area and by 1896, they had 3,000 acres under cultivation. All the farmland was bosque four years earlier. At least one settler, Francisco Padierna, was on his way to Colorado when he

26 Sam Vigil, a resident of Huerfano County Colorado, noted in a 1979 interview that his family emigrated from southern New Mexico (most likely the Mesilla Valley) to northern New Mexico before finally settling in Colorado by the 1890s. Another Huerfano County resident, Max Valdez, noted that his family emigrated to Colorado from the Alamogordo, New Mexico vicinity. Parts of the Alamogordo region were settled by residents fleeing the Mesilla Valley as early as the 1870s. It is possible that the Valdez family was part of this trend. The Valdez and Vigil oral histories are available are part of the Huerfano County Ethno History Project. Transcripts were accessed via the internet at www.kmitch.com/Huerfano/oralhist.html (Accessed November 16, 2011). Transcripts are also available at the Pueblo City-County Library; Thomas G. Andrews, Killing for Coal: Americas Deadliest Labor War (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) Pg 98.

27 This includes the current location of Hatch, New Mexico, which beginning in the 1970s became famous for Green Chile grown in the region.

28 Bosque, derived from the Spanish word for forest, is a thick growth of riparian shrubs and small trees that were once common (and still exist in protected areas) along the Rio Grande. Rio Grande bosques are dominated by deciduous varieties such as hackberry, willow, palo verde, and Mexican elder.
decided, instead, to acquire land in the Rincon Valley.29 As Mesilla Valley residents left the region in search of more productive land, others came in their place. The mayor of Ciudad Juarez, just across the river from El Paso, Texas, noted in 1890 that the drought was so devastating in and around his community that “a large portion of the population of [Ciudad Juarez] has been . . . forced to emigrate to [the Mesilla Valley]. Others made similar observations about migrations out of El Paso to the Las Cruces area. In both cases migrants moved to areas up river in hopes of finding more water and the welcome support of friends and relatives. 30

Granjon, nonetheless, describes dislocation and despair in every village he visits in 1902. Mesilla was, in fact, in better shape than all the other farming communities along the Rio Grande, barring Las Cruces. There was little question among observers that water famine resulted in “great suffering,” in the Mesilla Valley. Abandoned land was common. Some fruit trees, typically well suited to occasional drought, had died. Poor crops and crop failures became the norm.31 Conditions were worse as one traveled down-river, the direction Granjon was headed after leaving Mesilla.


30 Special Committee of the United States Senate on the Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands, Report of the Special Committee of the United States Senate on the Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands, Volume III: Rocky Mountain Region and Great Plains Senate 51st cong., 1st sess., 1890, Report No. 928, Pgs 30, 32.

The Monsignor continued his journey south to San Miguel, a much more modest settlement about twelve miles downstream from Mesilla. The fifty families living in the community were in worse condition than those in Mesilla. The priest writes that the poverty stricken residents were forced to live off the land because they were unable to raise any crops. Where Granjon describes the fields outside Mesilla as green, he ruefully notes that the fields in the vicinity of San Miguel are “withered” and that bosque was reclaiming agricultural land. He wondered how the residents in the village would survive.\(^{32}\) Apparently things only got worse as Granjon traveled south. He finds the plaza of La Mesa, a town about two miles from San Miguel, deserted and vacant. The traditional center of community activity was populated only by soaring cottonwood trees. Homes were deserted and had fallen into ruins.

Wandering among the desiccated fields around the farming community of La Mesa, Granjon marvels at a roadside plot covered with six of the largest pear trees he had ever seen. It seemed to him that the only organisms surviving among the withering and wilting landscape were the trees that had established themselves in better times. Just as the cultivation of alfalfa was partly a reflection of the drought and partly a function of the local economy, orchards were an expression of the history of the Mesilla Valley and the interplay of market and environment.

The first fruit trees in the Mesilla Valley were brought to the region by Mexican settlers. Initially the trees were planted near homes, but as the mercantile and freighting

market developed in Mesilla, farmers began planting orchards to grow fruit, especially apples, for the market. Mesilla merchant T.J Bull began growing apples, peaches, and apricots on his property in 1868. Thomas Casad developed an apple orchard of 3000 trees in 1876. No doubt, others followed their examples, as is evident by the fact that Granjon saw mature orchards of various sizes throughout the Mesilla Valley.

The expansion of orchards, however, was not immediate. While both Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents grew fruit trees, only about one in ten farmers reported dedicating a portion of their property to orchards in 1880. Approximately 6,500 fruit trees grew on plots of 1 to 12 acres in the valley. Most orchards were located in the Mesilla and Las Cruces area. Twenty years later, the Mesilla Valley was awash in orchards. No longer primarily confined to the area near Mesilla and Las Cruces, the orchards could be found throughout the valley. There were over 50,000 fruit trees of bearing age enumerated in the Mesilla Valley in the summer of 1900. Like alfalfa, orchards expanded dramatically during the drought. Trees of bearing age in 1900 would have to have been planted at least three years earlier. Under the drought conditions, it is likely that they were planted even earlier so that the root systems were established by the time of the sustained drought of the 1890s. The expansion of fruit tree cultivation, like alfalfa was the result of changing


34 La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 187

35 Census Office, Agriculture, Part II, 1900, Section VII, Table 2.
economic conditions and, more important, manufactured drought. The lack of irrigation water contributed to falling groundwater levels. By 1898, water that could previously be reached at six feet was fourteen feet below the ground. Like alfalfa, only large trees with deep roots could survive the in these conditions.  

Moreover, the two most common fruit trees grown in the Mesilla Valley, apple and peach, were also the most marketable.

Non-Hispanics appear to have taken greater advantage of the market than Hispanics, but there is no evidence that Hispanic farmers chose not to sell their produce, fruit, and other crops. For example, a decade after the arrival of the railroad in Las Cruces, a local Spanish language newspaper, El Promotor Escolar, implored Hispanic farmers to take care of their crops because there was a predicted to be shortage of grain in Europe and Mesilla Valley producers would find a lucrative market for the products of their toil. Three years later, the editors of El Democratica, argued that New Mexico needed to become a state because statehood will improve the market and price for local products. They envisioned an international market in which Mesilla Valley farm products could be found in “the capitals of Europe.”  

Hispanic farmers also sold produce and other crops locally. All Mesilla Valley merchants depended on local farm production. They purchased vegetables and fruit from local farmers. Again, this was not limited to Non-Hispanic farmers. For example, an 1894 advertisement for a fruit store that catered to the Hispanic population lists a wide variety of produce. Some products, like green chile, were locally grown and

36 Barker, Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley, Pg. 18.

37 “A Nuestos Agricultoras,” El Promotor Escolar September 12 1891; [No Title], El Democratica, August 4 1894.
usually cultivated by Hispanic farmers. The store promoted itself as a social center with the latest news from Mexico and five cent lemonade. It was a place where a resident of one of the more isolated agricultural villages could interact with the larger community.

Not all farmers sold their surplus to merchants. Some residents loaded their crops onto carts and sold them communities like El Paso and Las Cruces. The ubiquity of small-scale produce peddlers did not escape the attention of local officials, some of whom considered the informal markets an embarrassment that was incongruent with the modern “American” image they wanted to present to the outside world. In 1897, the Dona Ana County Commissioners passed an ordinance requiring that peddlers be licensed. Annual permit fees were set at 250 dollars per year. Such an exorbitant license fee was intended to put the small-scale operators that were a common fixture in Las Cruces and Mesilla out of business. There is no evidence that the scheme was successful. Peddlers continued to ply their wares into the twentieth century.38

Just as the ordinance failed to end peddling, the manufactured drought affected the crops framers chose to cultivate, but did not result in a wholesale shift in valley farming. Farmers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, continued to plant crops they had known since at least the 1870s. Economic and, especially ecological, forces dictated changes in the ratios of crops grown. Drought resistant, valuable crops such as alfalfa and fruit trees gained importance, but farmers continued to cultivate wheat and corn for their own use, or, if the

38 “Telegramas, Especial, Victor I Ochoa Arrestado,” El Democratica, June 23, 1894; “Locals,” Newman’s Semi-Weekly April 2 1881; “Locals,” Newman’s Semi-Weekly April 20 1881; [No Title], Dona Ana County Republican, April 1, 1897. The $250 figure seems quite high for 1897 and may be a typographical error in the newspaper. Nonetheless, the intended effect of the ordinance was to end the practice of small-scale peddling.
crop was good enough, the market. They also depended on small vegetable gardens. These
crops, however, were susceptible to failure when water was unavailable. Farmers who
wanted to survive were compelled to raise crops that would provide some security. For
many this meant increasing the acreage they planted in fruit trees and alfalfa. While some
residents may have planted the crops with subsistence in mind, there is little question that
the market value and drought resistance of the crops provided a measure of security that a
vegetable garden could not provide during a drought. Reliance on annual, shallow rooted,
crops became increasingly untenable.

The water famine dramatically threatened subsistence as an economic strategy.
Residents increasingly turned to labor and tenantry to make ends meet. There is little data
on farm labor, wage labor, and land tenure before the 1880s. Geographer Barbel Hannelore
Schonfeld Le Mar writes that in 1880 eighty-five percent of Mesilla Valley farmers owned
their farms and 15 percent were tenants. Twenty years of undependable water supply
affected land ownership. W.C. Barker writes in 1898 that share arrangements were
common in the Mesilla Valley. The tenant paid from ¼ share on unimproved land to a ½
share on land with productive orchards. Thirty percent of farmers were tenants, resident
farm managers, or only part owners in their properties. County-wide, the number of tenant
operated farms increased from 57 to nearly 200 between 1880 and 1900. 39

39 Barker, Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 40; La Mar “Water and Land in the
Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 70; Census Office, Productions of Agriculture 1880, Table 5; Census
Office, Agriculture, Part I, 1900, Table 10.
Day labor and farm labor arrangements were relatively uncommon, but not foreign, in the Mesilla Valley before the 1890s. Since the 1870s, merchants and other residents who owned farms in addition to other enterprises or duties sometimes hired laborers to assist in day-to-day agricultural operations. Labor, moreover, was not limited to agriculture. Railroad recruiters advertised in local newspapers in 1881 promising good wages and room and board to “Mexican and American” workers from the Mesilla Valley who could assist in construction of the line from Las Cruces to El Paso.40

The water famine, however, resulted in a dramatic shift. It forced framers to adopt supplemental labor more regularly. As early as 1890 it was clear to outside observers that some Mesilla Valley farmers adopted wage labor as an economic tool. This is reflected in census data. The 1880 enumeration schedules for communities in the Mesilla Valley reveal that some farmers were working as laborers, but they were rare and usually not the heads of households.41 The 1900 enumeration schedules, however, reveal a remarkable increase in number of day laborers and farm laborers living in the Mesilla Valley. There were also many heads of households who were considered day or farm laborers. While most laborers (as well as most residents) were Hispanic, some Non-Hispanic heads of household were also considered laborers. 42 These changes might be expected for the more populated


41 Newell, “Agriculture-Irrigation,” Pg. 5; La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 70. Enumeration Schedules are the handwritten tally sheets compiling the data census takers filled out while conducting surveys.

42 This data was compiled from a sampling of census data for Dona Ana county centered in the Mesilla Valley communities of Las Crucces, Mesilla, Chamberino, La Union, and Dona Ana. The data is available in the following National Archives Microfilm
communities of Las Cruces and Mesilla where there was increasing access to outside employment. The phenomenon, however, was valley-wide.

Farm and wage labor even became common in the small, comparatively isolated, agricultural communities west of the Rio Grande. For example, a significant number of Chamberino residents in 1900 were either day laborers or farm laborers. The laborers fall into three general categories. Some were sons who still lived at home with their fathers who were farmers. It is not clear if they were laborers on their family farm or hired themselves out to other employers. Other laborers rented homes or farms in the community. While the records do not specify the labor arrangement in these situations, it is likely that in at least some of these arrangements renters were either cash or share tenants. Some residents owned farms or homes and hired themselves out for extra income. At least one farmer (rather than laborer), Jose Barrio, rented a farm. 43 There is little question that the hydrological crisis in the valley contributed to the increase in farm and day labor in the agricultural communities, such as Chamberino, San Miguel, and La Mesa, as well as Mesilla and Las Cruces.

_____________________________


43 Ibid.
While the water drought caused considerable change in the Mesilla Valley, farming and irrigation was still a largely farmer dominated, usually Hispanic operated, endeavor in at the turn of the twentieth century. This is clearly represented in the manner in which irrigation ditches were managed in the 1890s. Praised by local observers as an admirable democratic system of control in which farmers and communities regulated, maintained, and controlled their own water and irrigation systems, there had been little change in the manner in which irrigation was managed since the initial settlement of Dona Ana in 1843.

Legislation played a role in facilitating the preservation of tradition. Laws passed by the New Mexico territorial legislature in 1851 and 1852 codified the traditional *acequia* practices and governance that had evolved in New Mexico since initial Spanish settlement in 1598. These laws explicitly legitimized the *acequia* institution, laid out the roles and duties of the *mayordomo* and ditch users, and provided a regulatory framework for ditch management that mirrored the customs practiced in Hispanic villages, like those in the Mesilla Valley. Changes to this system were enacted in the 1880s and 1890s. The new legislation provided for the establishment of ditch commissions. These commissions were given broad administrative powers, which historian Jose A. Rivera points out, “empowered the [*acequia*] institution to act on behalf of the common interest [of the ditch users] as a public corporation.” The *mayordomo* remained the “principal executive officer and water superintendent of the *acequia*,” but by the late 1890s, he followed policy established by the commission. Prior to the 1890s, the *mayordomo*, while beholden to the community for election to his post enjoyed supreme authority. The commission acquired some of the authority of the *mayordomo*, according to Rivera, to ensure that local democratic control of
water was maintained. This system was well established in the Mesilla Valley by the end of the nineteenth century.

Residents of each acequia served community in the Mesilla Valley congregated at public meetings, usually in early December, to elect ditch commissioners and a mayordomo from among their peers. Votes were allocated along a scale in relation to the amount of land held. Residents with 52 acres or more were granted six votes, while ditch users with little land had one vote. The logic behind this system was tied to the assumption that large landholders would be required to perform more work when called upon than small holders. All residents, however, were granted at least one vote. The commissioners, who served for one year and typically not compensated, were required to be ditch users. They were responsible for the general oversight of the acequia. It was not unusual for at least some of the commissioners to be Non-Hispanic, but many commissions still included a strong Hispanic presence. For example, the 1894 river commissioners in Las Cruces, the most Americanized town in the Mesilla Valley, included A.M. Holt, Manuel Parra, Domingo Luchini, Demetrio Provencio, and Estanislao Chavez. In addition to overseeing the management and finances of the acequias, the ditch commissioners met periodically during the year to mediate complaints, claims, and disputes. On the rare occasions that they could not sufficiently settle a case, it was referred to the territorial courts. While ditch

__________________________


45 Barker, Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley, Pgs. 22-3. [No Title], El Democratica, October 20 1894.
management was becoming more incorporated into the apparatus of the state, it was still a largely local enterprise. Decisions were locally made and locally enforced.

In addition to the commission, the residents, at their public meeting, elected a _mayordomo_ who would serve as ditch manager for a year. Arguably more important than the commissioners, the _mayordomo_, who received a cash salary and was also required to be a ditch user, was usually Hispanic. Funds for payment of _mayordomo_ salaries and other expenses were linked to marketable crops. Half of the salaries and expenses were payable after the wheat harvest in June. The other half was payable after the corn harvest in August. By the 1890s _mayordomos_ usually had assistants who helped with the day to day oversight of the canals, including cleaning, repair, and water distribution.46

Every February, the _mayordomo_ notified all landowners and, by the 1890s, tenants, of their ditch maintenance responsibilities based on the amount of land they irrigated. These responsibilities were manifested as a share or number of days work required. A farmer with over 52 acres was compelled to provide six days labor. Smaller irrigators were assessed less work in correlation with the amount of land they irrigated. If one chose not to fulfill their maintenance duties, he was fined $0.75 per allocated day of work. This money was then used to hire workers to perform the maintenance. Barker points out that this was the prevailing system in most Mesilla Valley communities.47

46 Barker, _Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley_, Pgs. 22-3.

47 Barker, _Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley_, Pgs. 22-3.
The ditch maintenance on the Las Cruces acequia was slightly different. The commissioners, not the Mayordomo, made an assessment of the costs and amount of maintenance work to be completed on the ditch. They then informed irrigators the amount of work (days) for which each was responsible. Landowners could then do the work themselves or have hired laborers do the work in their place. Wages in 1898 were fixed at $0.75 per day. In this manner a landowner assessed six days work could hire six workers for one day and have their commitments met. F.C. Barker, who served as a Las Cruces ditch commissioner, writes that most non-Hispanics in Las Cruces considered it “beneath their dignity to work at digging mud from the ditch.” Instead they, or the commissioners, hired local Hispanics to perform the ditch maintenance. The only exceptions to this arrangement were the occasions in which the landowners decided to use mechanized (scrapers) means to clear the ditches. In this case, they did the work themselves.

Barker’s observations indicate that at least some Mesilla Valley residents held racialized views of labor. 48 Edith M. Bowyer, a recent transplant to the Mesilla Valley from Virginia, starkly portrays this point of view. Bowyer, who moved to the region for health reasons, wrote a memoir where she spends considerable time excoriating the habits and culture of local Hispanics. She describes them a lazy, unintelligent, selfish, and an untrustworthy “mongrel race.” The only unqualified complimentary statement she makes is that local Hispanic farmers are adept at operating and managing irrigation. Publications and records deploying such overt racism in the Mesilla Valley at the end of the nineteenth century are not common, but Monsignor Granjon does lament the presence of Non-

48 Barker, Irrigation in the Mesilla Valley, Pgs. 22-3.
Hispanics in the valley who considered themselves superior to the Hispanics. A local Spanish language newspaper, *El Democratica*, makes a similar assertion in political terms. An October 1894 article argues that some valley residents allied with the Republican party “distrust Mexicans and think Mexicans are destined for insignificance.” Bowyer personifies this claim and makes overt statements about the insignificance of local Hispanics.49

Granjon notes, however, that local Hispanic residents have been able to insulate themselves from the influence of “the invader” and maintain their culture. This is also reflected in Bowyer’s account. She describes Catholic festivals, such as the Feast of St. Genevieve, in which local Hispanics blended religious observance with drinking, socializing, and dancing.50 Secular celebrations also occurred. For example, Don Agustin Marquez hosted an elegant community celebration at his house on December 31, 1890. An article in *El Defensor del Pueblo*, noted that there was “a fine meal and an abundance of wine, beer, and champagne.” It is not clear whether the partygoers consisted of an ethnically mixed or exclusively Hispanic group. It is likely that the group was mixed. Social mixing was not uncommon in the 1890s and, regardless of Bowyer’s opinions, Non-Hispanic Mesilla Valley residents did not shun Hispanic culture. The 1894 *Junta Patriotica*, a committee organized to plan the September Mexican independence celebration in Las Cruces included one Non-Hispanic member, J.G. Johnson. On the other hand, at least one Spanish Language


newspaper contained travel and ticket information for readers who wanted to travel to Santa Fe and Las Vegas, New Mexico for the annual Fourth of July celebrations and encampment of the volunteer fire departments.\textsuperscript{51}

Hispanics were not isolated from the community. In fact, local musicians, the band \textit{Santo Genovea}, were selected to represent the Mesilla Valley at the Chicago’s World’s Columbian Exposition in 1893. Music appears to have been an important avenue for local cross-ethnic interaction in the 1890s. Bands and orchestras were a common fixture. Hispanic musicians dominated many, such as the orchestra formed and led by Florencio Montoya, Ramon De La O, and Refugio R. Neri, a music professor at the local college. They offered their services to all the residents of Mesilla, Las Cruces, and Dona Ana. Charles Bull, the scion of Thomas Bull, a long-time valley merchant, led another band, the Antonio Joseph orchestra. The bands often played in public spaces, such as the plazas of Las Cruces and Mesilla where according to at least one observer they were met with large audiences and wide approval.\textsuperscript{52}

Musicians performed for Granjon when he visited Las Cruces and Mesilla, but another sound likely accompanied the Priest as he traveled dusty potholed roads in the Mesilla Valley. He, no doubt, heard the rumble of trains traveling between Las Cruces and El Paso. The Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroad route entered Las Cruces and continued along the east side of the Mesilla Valley to El Paso. Mesilla and the small


\textsuperscript{52} [No title], \textit{El Defensor Del Pueblo}, February 14 1891; [No title] \textit{El Promotor Escolar}, February 10 1892; [No Title], \textit{El Democrata}, August 4 1894.
communities west of the river where Granjon’s journey took him were bypassed. Barker asserted that this was by local initiative. He writes that merchants and landowners in Mesilla refused to sell land or provide a right-of-way for the railroad when the route was planned. Mesilla, in fact, was the route preferred by engineers of both the Southern Pacific and Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe railroads. Ultimately, neither route crossed through Mesilla or across nearby land. Mesiarillos, according to Barker, were afraid the arrival of the railroad in their community would undermine their prosperous freighting business. Residents of Las Cruces in the meantime, actively pursued the construction of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe route through their community. Their efforts were rewarded with the arrival of the first train at the Las Cruces depot on April 19, 1881.53

Historians have long pointed out the power of the railroad in transforming social and economic relations in New Mexico and other western states. Increasing numbers of non-Hispanic settlers from the eastern United States and Europe led to increased racial and economic tension in the Hispanic communities of New Mexico. The accommodation that characterized social relations before the railroad gave way to increased conflict and racial division. For example, the arrival of the railroad in Las Vegas New Mexico resulted in the loss of communal land to speculators and contributed to the rise of Las Gorras Blancas, a Hispanic oriented populist revolt against railroads and the social and racial tensions that accompanied them. Railroads also monopolized trade in northern New Mexico that had been dominated by Hispanic freighters. Historian Pablo Mitchell, describes the arrival of

the Railroad in New Mexico as “a time of . . . great upheaval” where “modernity and imperialism met with a special intensity.” 54 The Mesilla Valley, however, does not neatly fit into this model. There is no question that the Railroad brought change, but transformations were uneven and incomplete.

The railroad did result in important economic shifts in the region. Mesilla merchants and farmers who relied on lucrative contracts providing flour, produce and meat to regional military establishments found their business undermined by the simple fact that the United States Army found the provisioning of forts to be much more cost effective using the railroad. By the mid 1880s military establishments in New Mexico and West Texas were receiving supplies via rail from the eastern United States. Arizona forts acquired their material from California. At the same time the railroad opened the door for an expansion of trade. Fruit and alfalfa could be shipped to Colorado and other states. Some farmers and businessmen seized on this opportunity and expanded their orchards and land holdings to meet the expected expansion of markets. For example, even though the region was suffering for want of irrigation water, Thomas Casad added 2,500 peach trees to his apple orchard in 1888 to meet demand. Other farmers followed suit. Theodore Rounalt opened a cannery in Las Cruces in 1893 and, by 1897, was expanding operations to meet an increasing demand for Mesilla Valley fruit and tomatoes. Typical of many Mesilla Valley business owners, Rounalt also owned a farm. In 1897, he planted 100 acres in tomato and 25 in chile. His crop was destined for his cannery. Two flour mills were also in operation in the town. Martin Lohman marketed the flour produced from his mill in Las Cruces and El

54 Mitchell, Coyote Nation, Pg. 1.
Meanwhile, a mining boom in the Organ Mountains outside Las Cruces provided a profitable market for Las Cruces merchants who could provide tools and other mining equipment. Indeed, the arrival of the railroad and associated changes in market conditions ensured that Las Cruces became the commercial and political center of Dona Ana County.

The railroad also brought some early land speculation and settlement into the Mesilla Valley. With an eye toward increasing land values associated with the arrival of the railroad, several local Hispanic and non-Hispanic merchants and successful farmers, including Thomas Casad, Mariano Barela, Panfilo Gonzales, Guadalupe Ascarate, Nestor Armijo, and Morris and Phoebus Freudenthal, began purchasing land in 1880 and 1881. Some of these purchases contributed to the largest land holdings in the valley. The Casad family eventually held 9,000 acres, much of which was unimproved. Mariano Barela developed the first identifiable speculative enterprise in the Mesilla Valley when, throughout the 1880s, he gradually acquired most of the Santo Tomas Grant from land holders with the hopes that he could resell the land at a profit. He died in 1892 and left the land to his mother Rafaela. She, in turn, agreed to sell the land to the Mesilla Valley

55 Garcia, “History of fruit growing;” “Good times Ahead for All,” Dona Ana County Republican, April 1, 1897; “Around Town,” Dona Ana County Republican, March 17, 1897.

56 Scott Fritz "Mesilla Valley Merchants, 1870-1881: History of Anglo and Hispano Involvement in the Santa Fe Trade of Southern New Mexico" (MA Thesis, New Mexico State University, 1997), Pg. 71.

57 Fritz "Mesilla Valley Merchants," Pg. 67
Irrigation Company, a development and settlement company. It took over a decade for the acquisition to be finalized. Like the Casad land, most of Barela’s land was unimproved. The Mesilla Valley Irrigation Company never prospered.

These merchants and speculators were not the norm. To be sure, some, mostly Non-Hispanic, residents developed fairly large (over 500 acres) market oriented farming operations to support the booming trade with regional markets and military establishments and, eventually, railroad based trade. Most valley residents, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, farmed small plots for subsistence, with surplus traded or sold in anchor communities such as Mesilla, Las Cruces, or El Paso. The railroad did not dramatically change this fundamental characteristic of life in the Mesilla Valley.

Granjons’ trip to the Mesilla Valley post-dated the arrival of the railroad in Las Cruces by twenty years. Nonetheless, the Monsignor notes that even in Las Cruces the prevailing population of “Mexican and mestizos” still refused to learn English or abandon their own traditions and customs. The preservation of Hispanic culture and language was even more dominant after Granjon left Las Cruces. He, for example, conducted mass in English and Spanish in Las Cruces (even though only about one-fifth of the parishioners were non-Hispanic), but only officiated in Spanish once he arrived in Mesilla and the


59 Historian Victor Westphall notes that the arrival of the railroad did not result in dramatic agricultural development in New Mexico. He presents evidence showing that a shift in agricultural development did not begin in New Mexico, generally, until the 1890s. See Victor Westphall, The Public Domain in New Mexico, 1854-1891, (Albuquerque, NM: University of New Mexico Press, 1965) Pgs. 116.
villages west of the Rio Grande. He described feeling as if he had entered a Mexican village upon disembarking in Mesilla and marveled that “one would not believe that he was still in [the United States].”

There was, measured, but not dramatic, demographic change in most valley communities between 1880 and 1900. Even though the railroad arrived in 1881, agriculture was too precarious to attract large-scale settlement. Most successful farmers were residents who had established themselves in the Mesilla Valley before 1880. Census records between 1880 and 1900 indicate that while the population was quite mobile, Hispanics continued to comprise the largest part of the local population into the twentieth century. Non-Hispanics made up about seven percent of the Mesilla Valley population in 1880. By 1900 this figure had increased to 44 percent, but most Non-Hispanics were located in and near Las Cruces. If one wanted to purchase agricultural land he or she


61 It should be noted that census records have several limitations when used as a tool to explore Hispanic populations. First, there is that problem of identity. Census records often based ethnic analysis on surnames. The shortcomings of this methodology are apparent in the fact that, especially in the Mesilla Valley with its traditions of intermarriage, a non-Hispanic surname does not mean an individual is not of Hispanic heritage. I have attempted to overcome this problem by looking at both first name and surname, especially with married couples. A second limitation of the census records is the problem of under representation. This was especially true in rural areas or situations in which census takers were not particularly judicious in the surveys. This, however, did not appear to be a problem in the Mesilla Valley. The individuals I looked at were reflected in several successive censuses in both small rural communities and the larger more urban centers. Nonetheless, I have been careful to use the census records with their limitations in mind. For problems associated with census records see Thomas D. Boswell, “The Growth and Proportional Distribution of the Mexican Stock Population in the United States: 1910-1970,” Mississippi Geographer Vol. 7 (Spring 1979): Pgs. 57-8; and José Hernández, Leo Estrada, and David Alviérez, “Census Data and the Problem of Conceptually Defining the Mexican American Population,” Social Science Quarterly Vol. 53 (March 1973): Pgs 671-687.
needed to look no farther than local newspapers, which regularly contained descriptions of improved land for sale or rent in near Mesilla and Las Cruces. Advertised acreage offered was usually less than forty and most farms for sale had alfalfa and fruit trees. It was not unusual for a farm to consist of less than ten acres. Many of the newly arrived Non-Hispanic farmers were unfamiliar with irrigation farming. They learned to operate the irrigated farms that characterized Mesilla Valley agriculture from their Hispanic neighbors.\textsuperscript{62} Hispanic and Non-Hispanic residents also acquired public land through the Homestead Act and other land entry laws.

The public land was unimproved and located in the northern and south-central portions of the valley outside the boundaries of Mexican Land grants. There was no stereotypical entry-man in the Mesilla Valley. George T Preston was an Englishman who immigrated to the United States in 1886. He acquired a 160 acre homestead in the vicinity of Dona Ana in 1896. Royal Jackman, on the other hand, was a railroad employee living in El Paso, Texas, who acquired a 92 acre parcel near the farming town of Berino in 1897. Apparently he, unlike Preston, was an avocational farmer. Both men were recent arrivals in the Mesilla Valley. Gregorio Garcia, however, was an established valley resident when he homesteaded 160 acres near Anthony, New Mexico. Garcia, a farmer, had lived in the area since 1853. Jesus Arvizu was a laborer living in La Mesa, New Mexico as early as 1880 who, near the turn of the century, acquired a 160 acre homestead near that town. His son Armando also acquired 80 acres of public land nearby. By 1910, both Armando and his

\textsuperscript{62} La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pgs. 72, 240; See, for example, “Bargains in Real Estate,” \textit{Dona Ana County Republican}, March 11, 1897; “Bargains in Real Estate,” \textit{Dona Ana County Republican}, April 1 1897.
father were living in Las Cruces. Armando was working as a miner in the Organ Mountains. Another resident traveled the other direction. Frank Herron was the son of a Mid-western farmer who settled in the vicinity of Mesilla before 1880. As a young man he worked on his father’s farm before moving to La Mesa area. Frank and several of his relatives acquired homesteads during the water famine. Even his mother Rebecca got into the act. She received a patent to her homestead in 1894. Rebecca Herron’s neighbors included her sons, several Hispanic residents, and a few non-Hispanic settlers who also acquired homestead patents in the vicinity before 1900. Eventually Frank became a bar owner, with his brother Edgar, in La Mesa. This would imply that the Herrons were integrated into the larger interethnic community in which they lived and worked. 63

Established farming communities were less affected by the arrival of Non-Hispanic settlement than Las Cruces. For example, of the about 550 residents residing in Chamberino in 1880, only ten (7 adults and three children) were not Hispanic. These residents filled a variety of economic niches. Marquis Esterbrook was a doctor from Vermont, Tarpes Waenklin, a resident from Illinois, was a laborer. Others were farmers and carpenters. Twenty years later there were eleven non-Hispanic households in the community. Again, non-Hispanics filled a variety of economic roles including school

teachers, postmaster, and farmers. Counted among the farmers was a young man named Pearl M. Bailey who became one of the leading farmers and irrigation advocates in the Mesilla Valley. Hispanics continued to hold local positions of influence as merchants, sheriff, and mayor domo. The census also reveals considerable mobility. A significant percentage of the Chamberino residents listed in the 1880 and 1900 censuses were not born in the community. Most were born in Mexico or Texas (presumably the El Paso area). Chamberino was still a Mexican town. The nearby communities of La Mesa and San Miguel reflected similar characteristics.

There is little question that the railroad altered some large-scale economic and demographic patterns, but this transformation was generally localized in the Las Cruces area. The arrival of the railroad did not change the fact that the Mesilla Valley was still a largely Hispanic region in which Spanish remained the dominant language. Local plazas and residences still hosted Mexican patriotic holidays, religious celebrations, and other gatherings that attracted Hispanics and non-Hispanics. Cross-cultural social interaction was not eliminated by the arrival of new residents, such as Edith M. Bowyer, who held stark racial views. Most residents probably had more in common with their neighbors, regardless of race, than they did with Mrs. Bowyer. The majority practiced small-scale farming employing cultivation and irrigation practices that characterized Mesilla Valley framing since the 1840s.

These farmers, regardless of race or ethnicity, were suffering through a prolonged water famine that challenged their livelihoods. The water famine caused by irrigation development in Colorado’s San Luis Valley that, by 1890, was annually removing 1.5 million acre feet of water from the Rio Grande was much more threatening to Mesilla Valley residents, most of who relied on agriculture, than the railroad. Farms typically included subsistence crops, often accompanied by small acreages of marketable varieties. This tenuous arrangement was unsustainable without an adequate supply of water.

The manufactured drought triggered change. Subsistence farming became untenable and the grain market was unreliable. Other residents decided that agriculture was too unstable in the valley. They tapped into a long valley tradition and migrated to other, hopefully more amenable, locales. Farmers who remained in the Mesilla Valley began expanding acreage in drought tolerant crops, such as alfalfa and orchards. After all, valley farmers did not shun the idea of selling or trading their crops. While it was more common for non-Hispanic farmers to be more fully engaged in the market, all farmers reacted to changes in local markets and environment by changing the crops they grew. Land tenure also changed. While Non-Hispanic land-ownership and speculation increased after the arrival of the railroad it did not become dominant due to precarious environmental conditions that residents were enduring. Ironically, the lack of water may have served to protect some Hispanic land tenure. Farmers, nonetheless, were finding it difficult to maintain their subsistence lifestyles. As a result, they expanded their economic and land tenure strategies. It was not uncommon, even in the small agricultural villages, for residents to adopt outside employment as farm and wage laborers more readily. Tenantry
and share arrangements, moreover, were much more common in the Mesilla Valley in 1900 than they were in 1880.

The last decades of the nineteenth century in the Mesilla Valley were shaped by the railroad. To be sure, the arrival of the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe in Las Cruces in 1881 brought perceptible change, but tracks laid in Colorado ushered in much greater crisis and transformation. The opening of Colorado’s San Luis Valley to rail traffic in 1878 did not produce the rush of settlers that promoters anticipated. It did result in unprecedented irrigation development that reduced flows in the Rio Grande to such levels that the very existence of downstream communities, including those in the Mesilla Valley, was endangered. Survival pivoted on water, a scarce resource as valley residents entered the twentieth century.
Chapter 3: Contours of Resistance, Reform, and Progress

The closing decades of the nineteenth century certainly provided Mesilla Valley residents with challenges. Stresses triggered by a manufactured drought resulted in shifts in crops, work arrangements and land tenure. The crisis, generated by developers and irrigators in Colorado, did not, however, define life in the Mesilla Valley. There was not an impending sense of crisis, but there was a robust popular political scene in which concerns over water were expressed among larger political issues. Residents deployed two general strategies to protect their economic interests, preserve their social and cultural status, and ensure the viability of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. On one hand they resisted threats to their livelihoods as farmers and, for many, their Mexican identity. On the other hand they supported and campaigned for reformist and progressive solutions to redeem the Mesilla Valley. Both resistance and reform had varying levels of interethnic support and participation. The movements were not mutually exclusive. Instead, they manifested themselves in different arenas and addressed different threats to the Mesilla Valley.

An undated “political creed” contained in the personal papers of Thomas Casad, one of the region’s most prominent farmers and civic leaders, provides insight into some of the fundamental concerns Mesilla Valley residents held. The document, most likely written in 1876, predates the water shortage and does not address the drought. Nonetheless, the creed provides a useful glimpse into local popular politics.¹ The importance of community

¹ I use the term “popular politics” to encompass public expression outside organized politics. These expressions of public sentiment reveal the ways in which local residents contested and shaped hegemonic social and economic relationships. The term “popular
and a sense equal opportunity is clear. “All men,” the creed begins, “are equal before the Lord and are entitled to the fruits of their labor” and “to that [social position] wherever their industry, morality, good behavior, and orderly deportment may place them.” The Creed continues, “no individual no matter what his position may be, is exempt from contributing . . . his just and equitable share of effort for his individual and community good.” The document anticipates many of the concerns of the populist movement that would spread through much of the United States, including New Mexico, in the 1880s. The authors assert that “Legislation that gives to any portion of a community privileges or favors denied to others will sap the foundations of justice and our own republican form of government.” Finally, the creed expressed frustration with “exclusive privileges” of corporations and political corruption. The Casad family, having settled in the region in 1868 was integrated and intermarried into the dominant Hispanic social structure. Indeed, beginning in the 1870s Thomas Casad was an investor in, and agriculture columnist for, the Mesilla Valley Independent, a newspaper that pointedly served both the Hispanic and Non-Hispanic populations in the Mesilla Valley. It was published in English and Spanish and regularly printed editorials supporting the local Hispanic community.

The Casad political creed was a nascent form of protest and resistance that matured in the Mesilla Valley throughout the late nineteenth century. Protest in the region was not a

______________________________

politics” however, should not be understood as having socio-economic implications. Popular political expression in the Mesilla Valley often attracted wide demographic support.

2 “Political Creed,” Box 4, Folder4:6 Family Papers, Political Creed. Casad-Lane Family Papers, Ms 440, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library; Larson, New Mexico Populism, Pg. 76.
tradition dominated by non-Hispanics. Resistance was interethnic. Mesilla Valley Hispanics were not apathetic valley denizens, nor were they isolated. Popular protest addressed a wide range of threats, but often reflected divisions between newcomers and established residents. Conflicts over water became more common as the drought intensified.

Water figured prominently in a February 1885 protest in which residents posted a petition in the Plaza of San Eugenio, a farming community in the valley, condemning the manner in which water was distributed in favor of “foreigners.” Five years later, the city of Las Cruces released plans to consolidate two local precincts. The redistricting threatened to undermine the local political position of Hispanics and their non-Hispanic allies. Redistricting, moreover, affected the ways in which the ditches were going to be managed, because mayordomos and ditch commissioners were elected in each precinct. The loss of a discrete precinct meant the loss of influence and the attempt at redistricting resulted in an interethnic mass demonstration.3

Known as a Juntas de Indignacion, such demonstrations of collective action became common in New Mexico between the 1880s and 1930s. Protests were typically aimed against unpopular political officials or other authority figures, in support of popular officials, or, most often, to express anger over racism.4 The Juntas de Indignacion, according to sociologist Phillip B. Gonzales, grew out of a hybridization of Hispanic and non-Hispanic

3 “Protesta,” El Tiempo, Las Cruces, New Mexico, February 20, 1890; [No Title], El Tiempo, Las Cruces, New Mexico, February 26, 1885.

collective protest. He notes that New Mexico Hispanics had a long tradition of collective congre
gation where they came together in *juntas* (meetings) to express their interests. Juntas were also formed to plan celebrations and festivals and administer civic affairs. The annual meetings organizing Independence Day celebrations and the election of *mayordomos* were typical situations in which local residents congregated in the Mexican period and later.

By the 1880s, Hispanics, who were used to a tradition in which they made claims on their government through demonstration and petition, began directing their expressive impulse and organizational tradition toward threats to the community, abuses of power, and insults. Gonzales argues that this shift represents the incorporation of the non-Hispanic indignation meetings of the United States and Canada in which mass meetings of residents, under the direction of community leaders, “exert[ed] social control over” unpopular leaders or groups.\(^5\)

Indeed, the Hispanic press was specifically calling meetings expressing frustration with political abuses and racial stereotypes. They often called the gatherings *juntas de indignacion*. These meetings were usually spearheaded and conducted by Hispanics, but interethnic protest meetings did occur. In fact, interethnic protest was typical in the Mesilla Valley where *juntas de indignacion* were usually attended and organized by ethnically mixed crowds. This is fitting for a community that, by the 1890s, had a long tradition of cross-ethnic cooperation, transnational migration, and intermarriage. Interethnic

\(^5\) Gonzales, “La Junta de Indignacion,” Pg 166.
participation continued into the twentieth century even as more non-Hispanics moved into the region. For example, racial insults of New Mexican Hispanics published in Congressional and popular publications triggered protests and mass meetings in Las Cruces in 1902 and 1918. A cadre of local Hispanic and non-Hispanic leaders organized the 1918 protest. Therefore, even though Hispanics were increasingly excluded from formal politics after 1880, they were not without popular political expression, or totally excluded from the Non-Hispanic community. The Juntas de Indignacion, indeed, expressed political, economic, and cultural concerns that usually transcended party politics.

Concerns that linked the availability of water to the preservation of culture and economic viability became more pressing as the water famine deepened in the late 1880s and into the 1890s. Reaction was most robust when outsiders and newcomers threatened the availability of water as was evident in the 1885 petition posted in San Eugenio. A protest that arose in the winter of 1890 is illustrative of this tension. The editors of Tiempo, a Spanish language newspaper based in Las Cruces, called a Junta to protest plans to build a new acequia in the Mesilla Valley. The new ditch was going to be built by the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company and it would take water out of the Rio Grande upstream of the existing acequias and transport it several miles south to undeveloped lands. This was a threat to the viability of the established irrigation system.

Though not specifically identified as a Junta de Indignacion, it is clear that the protest was politically and culturally charged. The Tiempo editorial invited “each person to

come by the county courthouse at 3PM . . . to discuss the plan as a group [en junta]” and the ways in which a “swindling [enganifa] canal company intends to trespass upon the interests of our dear citizens.” The gravity of the situation was presented in stark terms. The article admonishes the reader to attend for it is “one of the most important steps for the defense and welfare of our property, our interests, and the well-being of our families.” It is also “our sacred duty to defend that which belongs to us, the sanctity of our homes, and to protect the most vulnerable of us.” The writer insists that “[w]e are all united against a few people wrecking our honest towns.” 7 This was a protest that reflected the connection between water, political expression, and cultural preservation. The editorial expresses this in stark terms.

The editors of *Tiempo* prefaced their objections to the new ditch by stating that they were “not opposed to progress and development,” or “the improvement of the present acequia system.” In other words, they were not traditionalists who eschewed modernization in place of custom. The anger over the planned ditch ran deeper than just concerns over water; it was planned by “foreigners and speculators.” The men behind the Mesilla Valley Land Company do not come across well in the article. In a scathing series of paragraphs they are described as outsiders who “do not and will not [ever] live in the area.” Their plans, according to the article, were facilitated by “bribery and corruption.” A theme that the article revisits more than once is the fact that company “mercenaries” are visiting residents and unscrupulously misrepresenting how the new ditch will affect the

7 “A Nuestro Pueblo,” *Tiempo*, January 23, 1890, Pg. 2. A similar editorial was also published in English in the newspaper.
established acequias. Regardless of the veracity of the editorial claims, it is clear that the protest was largely a reaction to outsiders who ignored the interests of the local population and failed to live up to the values expressed in the Casad political creed. The resistance triggered by the Mesilla Land and Irrigation Company was similar to the ways in which *Juntas de Inignacion* were triggered by insults and threats from outsiders.

A second, perhaps more fundamental, theme of the editorial is that of survival. The new ditch, according the editors of *Tiempo*, “will rob the people of their water” in order to irrigate thousands of undeveloped acres. As a result, land that has been “irrigated for fifty years” will become wasteland. Speaking directly to local farmers they write that after the new ditch is completed “lands that you and your fathers cultivated for 50 or 60 years will be without water” and “you will be robbed of the only way you can make a living and will, in the end, be taken advantage of by speculators.” Moreover, the new ditch which will bypass the established irrigation ditches will allow the developers to charge exorbitant rates for water. The low river level was a concern and, apparently, the developers told local farmers that in low flow years their *acequias* would have water before the new ditch. The organizers of the Junta were suspicious and they asked local residents will they honor their promise? Can we trust them? What security do we have? It is true that we have the law on our side. But what is the cost of enforcement? What chance do we have as disorganized as we are, many of us without resources, against a corporation [with money to spend on lawyers] that has already shown that it is unscrupulous.

---

8 “A Nuestro Pueblo,” *Tiempo*, January 23, 1890, Pg. 2.
The article rallies residents by assuring that “our people are alert to the danger of this threat and we can assure them no water will reach the . . . lands of the Mesilla Valley Land Company [sic].”

The foreigners and speculators upon which they were directing their ire were the men who organized of the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company, a real estate and canal development company incorporated in 1889. An earlier iteration of the company had acquired title to over 8,000 acres of undeveloped lands on the Brazito grant in 1875. Unlike the vast majority of grants in the Mesilla Valley, the Brazito Grant was not a community grant. It was an emprisario grant that had changed hands several times since it was initially granted in the early 1800s. Most of the land on the grant was still undeveloped nearly a century after it was initially proposed in 1805. The Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company, headed by the “foreigners and speculators” the editorial criticized, included a five member board of directors that consisted mostly of recent arrivals and non-resident investors. W.H.H. Llewellyn, for example, was a recent Mesilla Valley resident who arrived in 1885 to practice law in Las Cruces. Another member, F.W. Smith was also attorney who had been involved in development schemes in the Mesilla Valley since 1879. He settled in the region sometime in the 1880s and by 1889 was a member of the Las Cruces Ditch Commission. Jerome Smith was an investor based in Wichita Kansas. Harvey Hadden was a British investor. S.B. Newcomb was the most prominent member of the

9 “A Nuestro Pueblo,” Tiempo, January 23, 1890, Pg. 2.

10 “Shakespeare,” Mesilla News, August 16 1879, Pg 2; “New Corporations: Money and Brains Combining to Develop New Mexico’s Resources,” New Mexican (Santa Fe), March 27 1889, Pg. 4; “Pushing Ahead: The New Canal Already Under Way Teams and Men
board. A lawyer and judge, he arrived in the Mesilla Valley in 1875 and by 1884 owned a large ranch and vineyard in the region.\textsuperscript{11} Therefore, the foreigners and speculators that the protesters resisted were recent arrivals who were not well integrated into the community, or actual non-residents.

There is no record of how many people took part in the protest meeting. It was not widely reported in local newspapers. The January 25 edition of \textit{Tiempo}, however, ran two versions of resolutions adopted at the meeting, one in English and one in Spanish. The resolutions reveal the nature of the protest, if not the size. The anti-\textit{acequia} agitation, like the \textit{Juntas de Indignación}, was interethnic. One of the actions taken by the Junta was the election of men to represent the interests each community in the Mesilla Valley in opposition to the ditch. These representatives included John D. Barncastle, a longtime resident of the region who settled in the Mesilla Valley in the 1860s to farm and operate a store. He married the daughter of Pablo Melenderez, a founder of Dona Ana. Many representatives were early non-Hispanic settlers, including T.J. Bull, and Martin Lohman. There were also prominent Hispanics selected among the representatives, such as Guadalupe Ascarate and Estanislado Chavez. The unifying characteristic is that all the men were well established valley residents with at least some direct interest in farming. The fact

\______________

\textit{Hard at Work,} \textit{Mesilla Valley Democrat}, December 17, 1889, Pg. 3; “personal Pencilings,” \textit{Las Cruces Daily News}, April 5 1889, Pg. 4; “Local Briefs,” \textit{Mesilla Valley Democrat}, December 17, 1889, Pg. 3.

\textsuperscript{11} Newcomb gained some fame as Dona Ana County district attorney when he prosecuted Billy the Kid for murder in Mesilla in 1881. Maurice G. Fulton, \textit{History of the Lincoln County War: A Classic Account of Billy The Kid} (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1968) Pg. 389.
that the resolutions were published in English and Spanish also reveals that the movement was directed at a broad audience that crossed ethnic lines. The grievances expressed in the resolutions mirror the complaints of the January 23 editorial calling for the Junta. The elected committee of representatives was empowered to oppose and fight the actions of the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company.\textsuperscript{12}

The company never prospered. Their claim quickly came under litigation and by 1892 the company's dreams of development were fading. They originally agreed to purchase the land in four equal payments, but only paid the one-quarter down payment. The land was under foreclosure by 1892. Another developer, Nathan Boyd, eventually purchased the land. He had much more ambitious plans than the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company. The Brazito Grant was an important component of his speculative enterprise.

Boyd, a medical doctor, was born in Virginia, educated in San Francisco, and had spent nearly a decade in Sydney, Australia and London, England before he settled in the Mesilla Valley sometime around 1890. He was not a farmer. The doctor, along with a cadre of associates, formed the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company, the region's largest private irrigation company, in 1893. The company proposed to build a dam north of the Mesilla Valley near a landform known as the Elephant Butte. The resulting reservoir was planned to hold 250,000 acre-feet of water. When construction and consolidation of

\textsuperscript{12} “Resolutions Adopted by Mass Meeting of Citizens of the Mesilla Valley, Las Cruces, January 25, 1890,” \textit{Tiempo}, January 30, 1890, Pg 2; Resoluciones adoptadas por una junta en masa de los ciudadanos del valle de la Mesilla en Las Cruces el dia 25 de Enero de 1890,” \textit{Tiempo}, January 30, 1890, Pg 2.
irrigation ditches was complete, it was expected that it would provide adequate and predictable water to farmers in the Mesilla Valley and other nearby areas.

Boyd’s venture was not intended to rescue suffering farmers. It was, at its most basic level, a speculative enterprise. There was, however, a little problem. Speculation of this type usually involves the acquisition and sale of land. Unlike most speculative efforts in the West, the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company encompassed an area that was largely settled and under cultivation. Boyd and his partners addressed this limitation through the demands they placed on the local agricultural population. Farmers who wanted to benefit from the planned irrigation development were required to pledge half their land to the company and relinquish all rights to community ditches. They, moreover, were required to pay an annual water rental fee of $1.50 per acre.¹³

These conditions put an undue burden on Mesilla Valley farmers. Average farm size in the 1890s was 40 acres and few farms were regularly profitable. The company’s scheme to acquire land and the imposition of water fees was not popular. Only a few farmers accepted the land for water trade. In reality, Boyd’s plan would have undermined many of the farms operating in the Mesilla Valley. Moreover, the condition that communities turn the control of acequias over to the irrigation company threatened the traditional water democracies that had existed in the Mesilla Valley since 1843.

The water fees were meant to address the day-to-day operating expenses of the irrigation company, but were not adequate to pay for construction of the dam and reservoir. The original company plan called for the generation of development funds through stock sales and bond issuances. The expectation was that once dam construction was complete and land values increased, real estate held by the company would be sold. Profits from the land sales, largely comprised of lands donated by Mesilla Valley farmers, were to be paid back to stockholders who hoped to make a handy profit.\textsuperscript{14}

The Mesilla Valley speculators had the misfortune of forming their irrigation company during the Panic of 1893. As a result, the investors who were needed to pay for the construction of the dam were difficult to find anywhere in the United States. Boyd reacted by traveling to London in search of financial backing. He found support and organized a second company with British investors who were keen to make money off development in the Western United States. Boyd’s British supporters were blunt. They directly asserted that with the construction of the dam they would have a monopoly over water flowing down river and thus control the irrigable lands in the Mesilla and El Paso valleys.\textsuperscript{15} Investors were not interested in rescuing farmers half a world away. They understood the conditions that farmers had weathered since the 1880s and predicted that eventually all farmers would capitulate to the irrigation company’s terms. Farmers


remained suspicious and defiant. They were unwilling to accept the considerably less threatening plans of the Mesilla Land and Irrigation Company in 1890 and were not going to accede to Boyd’s scheme.

Indeed, the Juntas and other forms of popular resistance were a reaction to real and perceived threats to economic and cultural integrity. They arose from frustration and anger and were often directed toward outsiders who did not have the community’s interests in mind. The speculative enterprises that arose during the water famine reflect this local indignation and recalcitrance. These popular movements, however, were not necessarily reformist or traditionalist. Much of the protest was an attempt to preserve established conditions. They were expressions of opposition to threats from outside the valley.

Resistance was not the only strategy deployed to protect Mesilla Valley farming. A reform movement coalesced in the Mesilla Valley in the 1880s. Reformers hoped to redeem the valley and make it modern. This impulse was most forcefully expressed in the form of education.

Mesilla Valley leaders and politicians spent the last months of 1888 and early 1889 competing with Albuquerque, Socorro, and Las Vegas for the establishment of a college and research facility in the valley. Their efforts were rewarded when the New Mexico territorial legislature, in February 1889, authorized an agricultural college and an agricultural

experiment station near Las Cruces. The campaign to establish the agricultural
institutions was an effort dominated by non-Hispanics that reflected the hopes and
concerns of local residents who wanted to modernize and resurrect the Mesilla Valley.

The movement was characterized by optimism and visions of progress that
promised to save farming in the Mesilla Valley. John DeMier, a founding member of the first
farmers organization formed in the Mesilla Valley in 1889 and one of the local promoters of
the college, argued that the new institution would lead to agricultural innovation that
would benefit Mesilla Valley farmers. Other promoters noted that the college would ensure
that the Mesilla Valley would remain an important and relevant region of New Mexico. At
the same time, the college was seen as a salve for the problems local residents were
confronting in the late 1880s. DeMier, stressed that the experiment station could develop
ways to store runoff from rainstorms, thereby bringing local farmers much needed water.

The institution could, literally, save farming in the valley.

The college was designated as New Mexico’s land grant college under the provisions
of the Morrill Act. The Act, passed on 2 July 1862, facilitated the establishment of state
colleges through the grant of public land. States and territories, under provisions of the act,

17 The Territorial Institutions Act, New Mexico House Bill No. 186 (28 February
1889). All the communities competing for the establishment of the college were rewarded
with territorial institutions. Las Vegas was awarded the territorial Insane Asylum. The
College of Mines was established in Socorro. The University of New Mexico was established
in Albuquerque.

18 Simon F. Kropp, “Hiram Hadley and the founding of New Mexico State University,”
Arizona and the West, Vol. 9, No. 1 (Spring 1967): Pgs. 27-8; “Local Briefs,” Mesilla Valley
Democrat, November 18, 1889, Pg. 3.
received 30,000 acres of public land for each Senator and Representative in Congress, far more than was needed for a college campus. Indeed, the Act stipulated that the lands be sold by the state (or territory) and that proceeds from the sales be placed in a “perpetual fund” to support the administration and maintenance of a state college. The Morrill Act established a framework for a nascent federal influence in Western agriculture. While state and territorial legislatures were explicitly empowered to determine the specific ways in which agricultural education was developed and provided, the federal government specified that the colleges primarily teach “agriculture and the mechanic arts [and] promote the liberal and practical education of the industrial classes.”

The Morrill Act was one of two major pieces of federal legislation that shaped the establishment of what came to be known as the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts (N.M.A.&M.A.).

The Hatch Act, passed in 1887, authorized the appropriation of $15,0000 from the sale of public lands for the establishment of agricultural experiment stations in every state and territory where a land grant college was established. The Act provided a modern regulated framework for scientific research “bearing directly on the agricultural industry of the United States.” The United States Commissioner (Secretary) of Agriculture was to provide oversight and ensure “uniformity of methods and results.” Experiment stations were directed to disseminate research results throughout the states or territories in which were located, and to “individuals actually engaged in farming.”

19 Morrill Act of 1862, Public Law 37-108 (July 2, 1862).

A primary experiment station was established in association with the new land grant college. The college and experiment station were located between Las Cruces and Mesilla. Two secondary stations were also established in the northern New Mexico communities of Aztec and Las Vegas. New Mexico legislators, partly at the prodding of local lobbyists, decided in 1889 that the Mesilla Valley would be an ideal location for such an institution. Even with the drought, the region was widely viewed as one of New Mexico’s most important agricultural centers. The founding of N.M.A.&M.A. (renamed New Mexico State University in 1960) and its associated agricultural experiment station resoundingly confirmed the opinions of some residents who saw the territory’s farming future in southern New Mexico. The Hatch Act represents an incremental increase in federal influence in the Mesilla Valley and New Mexico that became more pronounced in the twentieth century as federal reclamation engineers descended upon the region. This federal influence would serve to modernize farming in the Mesilla Valley and more profoundly link farmers to the market. At the same time, the experiment station, and college were still locally supported and administered institutions with a significant amount of autonomy.

21 Nationally, the Hatch Act also reveals the presence of farmer activism in the 1880s. It was passed, partly, due to agitation from farmers across the United States. This movement for a federal role in agricultural development paralleled the rise of populism in the United States. The Farmers Alliance, the most active and influential populist farmer’s organization in the United States, played an active role in the passage of the Hatch Act. Public land law historian Paul W. Gates writes that support for the establishment of agricultural experiment stations was fostered in large part by a series of agricultural conventions held throughout the 1880s by groups like the Farmers Alliance. See Charles Postel, The Populist Vision (New York, NY.: Oxford University Press, 2007) Pg. 55; Paul Wallace Gates, History of Public Land Law Development (Holmes Beach, FL.: WM. W. Gaunt and Sons, Inc., 1987) Pg. 26
The campaign for a local college was not, therefore, separate from the forces and individuals involved in efforts to protect the Hispanic community. While the effort to establish the college was dominated by Non-Hispanics, there was interest among the Hispanic community. A few Mesilla Valley Hispanics, including prominent merchant Jacinto Armijo, whose grandson would become an important newspaper publisher and advocate for local Hispanics, were among the agitators for the establishment of the college and experiment station. An early 1891 editorial in El Defensor Del Pueblo, a local newspaper, celebrated the establishment of the college and asserted that it would be of particular benefit to poor Mexicans (a term they use). The author argues that fathers of Mexican families should send their sons to school to get an education in order to sustain their families, society, and country. This will become a common discourse among Hispanic community leaders.

Other advocates for the local Hispanic population will repeat this theme. Albert J. Fountain, Sr. a well-known promoter of the interests of the Mesilla Valley and the local Hispanic population was another primary advocate for the establishment of the college. Fountain reflects the multicultural history of the Mesilla Valley. He first visited the Mesilla Valley during the Civil War, as a member of the California Column. While stationed in the region, he met and married Mariana Perez, the daughter of a prominent Mesilla resident.

---

22 “El Colegio de Agricultura”, El Defensor Del Pueblo, February 14, 1891.

23 Corey Recko, Murder on the White Sands: The Disappearance of Albert and Henry Fountain (Denton, TX.: University of North Texas Press, 2007) Pg. 4. Albert Fountain Sr. and his youngest son Henry were murdered while traveling between Las Cruces and Tularosa.
The Fountains initially made their home in El Paso, Texas after the Civil War. Fountain, a lawyer, was elected to the Texas state senate in 1869 when Radical Republicans swept statewide elections. He served one four-year term before leaving Texas and settling in Mesilla with his wife and five children. Fountain spent the rest of his life in the Mesilla Valley where he quickly rose to political and social prominence. He immediately began a law practice in Mesilla where he became known as a defender of Hispanic interests. His advocacy was not, however, limited to the courts. Fountain, along with fellow California Column veterans, Thomas Casad and John Crouch, began publishing a newspaper in 1876. The weekly paper, the *Mesilla Valley Independent/El independiente del valle de la Mesilla*, was published in English and Spanish. Fountain, as editor-in-chief, viewed the publication as a tool to promote and advocate the interests and development of the region, but he also aggressively attacked the anti-Hispanic attitudes that some new arrivals held and considered himself a voice for the resentments that many Hispanics felt toward the superior attitudes that racially biased newcomers brought to the Mesilla Valley.²⁴

This activism rubbed off on some of Fountain’s children who identified strongly with their Mexican and Hispanic heritage. Tomàs Fountain, for example, served as an artillery captain under Pancho Villa during the Mexican Revolution. Sadly, he was eventually court-martialed and executed by the revolutionary army. Albert Jr., the eldest

New Mexico in 1896. The crime, possible related to a political feud between Fountain and A.B. Fall, has never been solved. See Recko, *White Sands*.

Fountain son, was less adventurous than his brother, but his ethnic pride was unquestionable. As a young man of eighteen, he penned a letter to the *Rio Grande Republican*, a local newspaper, expressing dismay that he was derisively called a young Mexican. He asserted that he was as American as anyone else. He made clear however that he was supremely proud of his “Mexican blood,” and that the trend of labeling local Hispanics as Mexicans was a dangerous path that led to the assumption that they somehow “have no rights to which other American citizens (born perhaps in Europe) are bound to respect.” The younger Albert’s ethnic identity was further solidified when he married a local Hispanic woman named Terestia Garcia in 1883 and began farming and running a local mercantile business. Like his father, Albert Jr. became active in politics, education, and civic projects, including raising funds for the construction of a bandstand in the Mesilla Plaza.  

Hiram Hadley, another early promoter of higher education in the Mesilla Valley, was considerably less attuned to the interethnic population than the Fountains. He was a recent migrant from Indiana. By the time Hadley, a Quaker, arrived in Las Cruces in 1887, he was a recognized authority on education who had written a textbook, worked for a publisher, opened his own school, and served as principal at another. The educator wasted little time in making his influence known in Las Cruces. He, along with a core group of residents, including Albert Fountain, Sr., opened Las Cruces College on September 17, 1888.  

---


Cruces College was absorbed by N.M.A.&M.A. by the fall of 1890 and Hadley became the new institution’s President of Faculty. Hadley, perhaps reflecting the fact that he was a relatively recent arrival to New Mexico, was intolerant of the Spanish language and argued that it had little place in public education.²⁷ Hadley was out of step with some of his own students, their parents, and established residents such as Albert J. Fountain, Sr.

Las Cruces College included a special class of advanced students who intended to pursue additional education after leaving the local institution. The class consisted of four young men. One of them, Fabían García, must have found Hadley’s views on Spanish language particularly perplexing. The young student came from very different circumstances than Hadley. He, in fact, reflected the established regional migratory traditions of the Mesilla Valley. Like many valley residents, García, born in Chihuahua, Mexico in 1871, spent part of his life in migration. He experienced tragedy early in life finding himself orphaned before his third birthday. It is unclear how his parents died, but Doña Jacoba, García’s grandmother, took the young child and left Mexico for the United States. She initially found work as a housekeeper in the mining towns of San Lorenzo and Georgetown, New Mexico. Finally, in 1885 Doña Jacoba, with Fabían in tow, arrived in the Mesilla Valley. She quickly found employment as a housekeeper for the family of Thomas Casad. This was a fortunate move. The Casads welcomed García into their family and even hired a tutor to provide his education. Three years later, García was enrolled in Las Cruces college where he graduated with the first N.M.A.&M.A. class in 1894. After spending a year

in graduate study at Cornell University in Ithaca, NY, García returned to the Mesilla Valley. He accepted a position with the college as an assistant professor while completing his Master of Science degree. In 1904, García became a professor of horticulture at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, one of many increasingly prestigious positions he held at the institution until his retirement in 1945. García was also named the director of the Agricultural Experiment Station in 1914.

García’s professional work personified agricultural development in the Mesilla Valley. Much of his research focused on important crops in New Mexico and, especially, the Mesilla Valley. Orchards were becoming more prevalent in the Mesilla Valley in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Fittingly, García’s early publications dealt with orchard crops. The professor also spent considerable effort studying crops that would eventually become significant in the region. For example, García began experimenting with onions in 1904. Onions became a principal market crop in the late 1930s.

28 See for example, George Vestal and Fabián García, Report on Plums, New Mexico, Bulletin No. 27, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Mesilla Park, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1898); Fabián García, The Effects of Spring Frosts on the Peach Crop, With Cultural notes on the Peach in New Mexico, Bulletin No. 30, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Las Cruces, NM: Dona Ana County Republican, 1899); Fabián García, Orchard Notes, Bulletin No. 39, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1901); Fabián García, Apple Culture Under Irrigation, Bulletin No. 75, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1910); Fabián García, Peach Experiments, Bulletin No. 76, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1911).

29 Joe Corgan and others, Bulb Onion Culture and Management for Southern New Mexico, Circular 563, New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service, revised by Stephanie Walker and others (Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 2009),
into the viability of pecan trees in the Mesilla Valley began in 1913 and helped trigger the development of extensive pecan cultivation by the 1930s. The Mesilla Valley eventually became one the top pecan producing regions in the world.\textsuperscript{30} Though he began publishing on agricultural topics in 1898, García does not discuss the valley drought except to make some general statements about water scarcity. It is as if the lack of water is a normal condition with which farmers must contend. This may have been due to the fact that the professor had no experience with the Mesilla Valley before the effects of the manufactured drought were apparent.

Chile cultivation, García's most enduring research effort, is indelibly linked with the Mesilla Valley. His interest in the cultivation of chile may have been a purely academic endeavor, but it also reflected his connection with his ethnic heritage. The professor began studying chile plants in 1888 before he even began his higher education. At the time, the crop was largely limited to the fields of Hispanic farms throughout New Mexico and into Mexico. Like many traditional crops, there was no control over the genetic constitution of

\textbf{n.p.; see Fabián García, \textit{Onion Culture}, Bulletin No. 52, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1904); Fabián García, \textit{Onion Tests: 1905-1909}, Bulletin No. 74, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1910); Fabián García, \textit{Growing Denia Onion Seed}, Bulletin No. 82, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Las Cruces, NM: Rio Grande Republican, 1912); Fabián García and A.B. Fite, \textit{Early Grano Onion Culture}, Bulletin No. 193, New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station (State College, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1931).}

\textbf{30 Fabián García and A.B. Fite, \textit{Preliminary Pecan Experiments}, Bulletin No. 145, New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station (State College, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1925); Esteban Herrera, \textit{Historical Background of Pecan Plantings in the Western Region}, New Mexico State University College of Agriculture, Guide H-626 PH 1-110 (Las Cruces, NM.: New Mexico State University, 2000), n.p.}
seed stock. This resulted in a dramatically unpredictable variation in the size and heat of chile pods from plant to plant, even within a single crop. García saw this as a problem and wanted to standardize the appearance and flavor of chile varieties. He assumed that such changes would make chile a more viable and profitable crop in the region. Research began in earnest in 1894, when García gathered local chiles from Hispanic farms and gardens. He bred and crossbred the chile plants for several years until he developed the historically important chile cultivar, the New Mexico No. 9. This chile was less hot than the original varieties he collected from local farmers, the chile pods were uniform in size, relatively fleshy, and had the long slender shape that characterizes today’s Anaheim or Hatch green chile. The New Mexico No. 9 became the standard for green and red New Mexico style chile until additional varieties were developed in the 1950s. The cultivar helped to establish the modern commercial market for chile and enabled the Mexican food industry to develop in the United States. 31 In fact, the California Anaheim pepper is actually a cultivar created in New Mexico from this seminal chile plant.

Unlike his other research in which he experimented with the improvement of minor crops in the Mesilla Valley, García’s interest in chile cultivation reflects his interest in a locally important crop that was, for the most part, grown and used by Hispanic residents. He writes in a 1908 publication describing his research that both ripe (red) and green chile are an important food item among Mexicans and Hispanics. While he notes that the market for chile is growing, it was far from robust. The reality was that, even though there was a

31 Danise, Coon, Eric Votava, and Paul Bosland. The Chile Cultivars of New Mexico State University, Research Report 763, New Mexico State University: USDA Agricultural Experiment Station (Las Cruces, NM.: New Mexico State University, 2008) Pg 2.
chile cannery in Las Cruces, most of the crop was grown by Hispanic farmers and used locally. García was certainly interested in creating chile crops that were palatable and marketable to the non-Hispanic consumers, but by developing such plants he was also refining a crop that was almost exclusively grown by Hispanics. This was not the case with orchard crops, onions, or pecans. In this manner, García’s extensive research and effort to develop more robust and dependable varieties of chile reflect a link to his Hispanic heritage without ignoring the larger economic forces shaping agriculture in the early twentieth century.

Fabián García, to be sure, was not merely an academic and administrator interested in furthering the evolution of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. He also had a strong sense of ethnic pride. A biographer noted that García was particularly attentive to Hispanic farmers and students. He did publish at least some of his research in Spanish. He also traveled extensively throughout the Mesilla Valley and New Mexico speaking to Hispanic and non-Hispanic farmers on a wide variety of topics including agriculture, history, and education.

32 Fabián García, Chile Culture, Bulletin No. 67, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Albuquerque, NM: Albuquerque Morning Journal, 1908) Pgs 4,31.

33 Fabián Garcia, “Colegio De Agricultura Y Artes Mecanicas De Nuevo Mexico. Estacion Experimental Agricola. Boletin para la Prensa No. 56: Manzanas,” Labrador (Las Cruces, NM), January 31, 1902; Fabián Garcia, “Colegio De Agricultura Y Artes Mecanicas. Estacion Experimental Agricola en Mesilla Park, N. M.: La Cinche de la Calabaza,” Labrador (Las Cruces, NM), April 22, 1904, Fabián García, El Guzano de la Manzana, Press Bulletin 415, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (1920); Fabián García, La cebolla, el oja, y la espinaca, Bulletin No. 115, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station (Las Cruces, NM: Rio Grande Republican, 1916); Fabián García, [No Title], August 5, 1938; Box 5, Folder 2: Correspondence 1930-39, Fabián García Papers, Ms 71, Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University Library; hereafter cited as Fabián García Papers.
He provided rooms to poor Hispanic students while they attended the college and urged them to take pride in their Hispanic heritage and Mexican identity. Upon his death in 1948, García left his entire estate to the college, but included a provision that $85,000 be set aside to construct a dorm for students with Hispanic surnames whose hardships he understood.  

García’s ethnic pride was accompanied by a Progressive Era sensibility that stressed the importance of science and innovation to future prosperity. This is well reflected in his professional writings, which are discussed above. Again, the symbolic center of his perspective is reflected in his efforts to breed a better chile. García’s views are also reflected in speeches he made to Hispanic farmers throughout his career. His personal papers contain transcripts for several, mostly undated, speeches presented to Spanish speaking residents of the Mesilla Valley and throughout New Mexico.  

García expressed several themes in his speeches to Hispanic farmers. One was a deep respect for farming and farmers. In an undated speech (probably written in the 1910s) to Hispanic farmers, he argues that even though some believe that “any other

34 D.E. Rodriguez to Fabián García, November 29, 1927 Box 5, Folder 1: Correspondence 1920-29, Fabián García Papers; Josefina Greck to Fabián García, December 31, 1934, Box 5, Folder 2: Correspondence 1930-39, Fabián García Papers; Mrs. Carl Prince to Fabián García, April 11, 1927, Box 1, Folder 5: General Correspondence 1920-1929, Fabián García Papers; [no author], “Partial Biography of Dr. Fabian Garcia, Director, New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station, September 1944,” Box 1, Folder 1: Biographical File, Fabián García Papers; Nena Singleton, “Fabián García: Pioneer Horticulturalist,” Online Exhibit of the NMSU Archives, Biographical narrative is available at http://archives.nmsu.edu/rghc/exhibits/garciaexhibit/menu.htm.  

35 See Box 6 Folder 1: Speeches on Education 1911 1928, and Undated and Box 5, Folder 4: Manuscripts and Reports 1905-1939, Fabián García Papers.
vocation is better and more honorable than that of the farmer;” they are wrong. In fact, the professor asserts “agriculture is equal if not superior to other professions.” It is an industry that serves humanity. He argues, though, that agriculture has changed and it is not the profession of the past century. It is developing into a modern industry where one must understand science. This reveals a second theme in his speeches to Spanish speaking farmers and is a reflection of his faith in science. Building on his assertions that agriculture is changing, García urges local farmers to take advantage of the assistance provided by the extension service, and other agricultural institutions.36

The importance of education becomes central within this thematic framework. García points out that some, ostensibly members of his audience, think that a farmer needs no formal education. This, he states, is a misguided notion. He claims that even farm laborers need a formal education because it allows them to do their jobs better and with more expertise. Continuing on the education theme, García argues that educated farmers are much more likely to have the skills to weather the problems encountered during ones career (en su carrera). Moreover, the educated farmer is more successful and independent. He admonishes fathers to send their sons to school, especially the agricultural college. “Fathers” he says, “think of your children and of this wonderful opportunity that is available to them!”37


37 García, “Desarrollo de la Agricultura,”
Hispanics throughout New Mexico were suspicious of some American institutions. Expecting resistance, García reveals a third theme. He links the development of modern agriculture and education to Mexican identity. The professor notes that Mexico has agricultural colleges and experimental stations. It is no coincidence that he specifically discusses one that was recently established in Ciudad Juarez, the most important Mexican town in the region. It was also a town from which many Mesilla Valley residents had migrated and where many continued to maintain close ties. It is as if he is saying that accepting extension and education is not a denial of one’s Mexican nationalism. Finally, he thematically ties education to stature in the United States. García tells the patriarchs of Hispanic families that education will not only help their children become better farmers, but it will also allow them to take an active role in the development of New Mexico’s and the nation’s resources. Also, he notes, they will be progressive purveyors of the most admirable of vocations and will have the respect of the entire population.38

García was asserting a common progressive view in which modern agriculture shaped by education and expertise played a pivotal role in preserving the farming tradition. He, however, was not arguing for assimilation. The professor was not interested in local Hispanics shedding their cultural and national affiliations. García was, in fact, a longtime member of the Alianza Hispano Americana, a foundational Mexican-American advocacy organization and fraternal insurance society established in Tucson, Arizona in 1894.

38 García, “Desarrollo de la Agricultura,”
The formation of the *Alianza Hispano Americana* was triggered by the establishment of a branch of the ardently nativist American Protective Association in Tucson. More generally, the founding of the organization was a reaction to the increasing economic and political influence that Non-Hispanics gained in the Southwest after the arrival of the railroad. 39 Branches of the *Alianza* spread throughout the Southwest after 1894. The first *Alianza* branch in the Mesilla Valley was organized in Las Cruces on May 23, 1906. Other *Alianza* chapters were organized in farming communities throughout the Mesilla Valley in the late 1920s. 40

The founding members of the Las Cruces branch of the *Alianza* were a diverse group of prominent members of the local community. They included Priciliano Moreno, a local pharmacist with extensive public service experience, including serving as county tax assessor, college regent, and school board member. Ramon T. Nevares was a successful bar owner whose establishments attracted an interethnic crowd. Like Moreno, Nevares served in various official roles. By the time the *Alianza* branch was formed, he had acted as town marshal and deputy constable in Las Cruces. Isidoro Armijo was related to some of Dona Ana’s original settlers. A graduate of N.M.A.&M.A., he briefly taught school before he embarked on a dual career as a newspaper publisher and interpreter. He began printing *La


Flor del Valle in the Mesilla Valley in 1894. Four year later, Armijo started El Progresso, a Spanish language paper based in Trinidad, Colorado. He also served as a court interpreter for the third Judicial District in Las Cruces and county clerk and recorder. Armijo’s public service experience was similar to those of his contemporaries. In addition to their prominent roles in the local community, the men also represent some core characteristics of life in the Mesilla Valley. Transnational and intraregional migratory traditions are reflected by the fact that they regularly traveled into Mexico and throughout the region visiting family and friends and even attending the Cinco de Mayo celebrations in Ciudad Juarez. Popular political participation is evident in the fact that at least one member, Ramon T. Nevaras, had participated in Junatas de Indignaction in the past. Perhaps unique to the Alianza in the Mesilla Valley, a Non-Hispanic name is listed among the officers of the organization. It was Albert J. Fountain, Jr., the man who had publicly celebrated both his Mexican and American heritage over two decades earlier.  

41 He, like his father, continued to be an advocate for the interests of the Mesilla Valley and its residents.

Fountain’s connections with the Hispanic community ran deep. The Las Cruces branch of the Alianza Hispano Americana was established less than a year after he opened a

41 “La Alianza Hispano Americana,” Labrador, May 25, 1906; [No Title] Democrata, October 20, 1894; “[No Title], Labrador, May 24, 1901; “Algunos Prominantes del Condado,” Eco del Valle, September 23, 1911; [No Title], Labrador, November 23, 1900; [No Title], Labrador, June 26, 1898; [No Title], Eco del Valle, June 23, 1906; “Localidades,” Tiempo, May 13, 1905; “Locales y Personales,” Eco del Valle, October 1, 1908; “Procedimientos de la comison de condado reunion regular,” Tiempo, February 11, 1892; “Protesta. El pueblo entero se labanta,” Tiempo, February 20, 1890; [No title], Laborador, January 13, 1899; “Around Town,” Dona Ana County Republican, September 8, 1898; “Locales y Personales,” Eco del Valle, August 18, 1908; “Procedimientos del cuerpo de comisinados,” Labrador, October 15, 1909.
theater in Mesilla, which eventually became the first movie house in New Mexico. His
decision to open the establishment in Mesilla, a largely Hispanic community instead of the
more American town of Las Cruces, further reflects his relationship with the Hispanic
community. The Fountain family provided entertainment to a mostly Spanish speaking
audience. Fountain also provided Spanish translations of the English subtitles of early
silent movies while his wife and children performed music.

Given his continued diverse advocacy for the Mesilla Valley Hispanic Community, of
which he considered himself a member, it is not surprising that Albert Fountain, Jr. was
involved in the founding of the *Alianza Hispano Americana*. The organization reflected
many of his interests and goals. Membership in the organization included both native-born
American citizens (almost entirely Hispanic) and migrants from Mexico. This was
especially important in regions like the Mesilla Valley where relatively recent immigrants
made up a significant component of the local Hispanic population. Membership was open to
poor, middle, and working class Hispanics, but not migrant laborers. The latter were
considered too rootless and their employment too insecure to pay the dues funding the
*Alianza’s* burial and life insurance programs. Fabián García, a migrant himself, served as the
organization’s Mesilla Valley treasurer from 1908 until 1942. In this capacity he,
apparently, did more than keep track of money. The professor was described by a
contemporary as a one of the most effective leaders in the *Alianza’s* efforts to protect and
preserve Mexican pride and culture.42

42 Briegel, “Alianza Hispano-Americana,” Pgs. 12, 62, 77, 89; Alfredo Levy,
Apoderado General en la Republica Mexico de la Alianza Hispano Americana, Mexico City to
Ostensibly a fraternal insurance society that provided death benefits, the organization served to protect the interests of Hispanics and Hispanic communities throughout the Western United States. Three concepts formed the core of the Alianza’s mission: Protección, Moralidad, and Instrucción. Protección was interpreted by the organization as the willingness to unselfishly provide for the community, especially the needy. The concept of Moralidad was not linked to a religious sense of morality, but, instead was an assertion that members reflect the social norms that would make them respected members of their community. Instrucción was expressed as the necessity to obtain a broad practical education to in order to provide Hispanics with the tools to prosper in what the Alianza considered a foreign land (the United States). At the same time, the Alianza aggressively pressed for the preservation of the Spanish language and Mexican identity. This is reflected in the importance the organization placed on the maintenance of the Hispanic, especially Mexican, traditions and cultural practices. Language is an obvious reflection of the motivation for cultural preservation.43

_________

Sr. José González, Presidéndte de Logia #22, Las Cruces, NM, Julio 26 de 1930, Box 4, Folder 2: Alianza Hispano Americana 1908-1942, Fabián García Papers. Records tallying individual Alianza membership payments dating back to 1908 are located in Fabián García’s personal papers. See Fabián García Papers Box 4, Folder 2: Alianza Hispano Americana 1908-1942.

The Mesilla Valley Alianza was enmeshed in the community. They met in established semi-public places, such as schoolhouses and the county courthouse. The organization straddled the line between the Mexican cultural world and the American political and economic world that was becoming more important in the Mesilla Valley. Like other chapters, the local Alianza sponsored Fiestas Patrias and other social gatherings that commemorated Mexican national holidays or celebrated Mexican culture. Local Hispanic and non-Hispanic political and social elites were usually invited to these festivities. The social gatherings served, in part, to forge a cultural middle ground. This appears to have gone both ways. The Alianza hosted dances on the Fourth of July and, on at least one occasion, members of the organization attended a “smoker” at the local Elks lodge. The Alianza, moreover, provided death benefits to at least one non-Hispanic member. They paid Samuel Gleck, a southerner who settled in the Mesilla Valley after the Civil War, 200 pesos after his wife passed away in 1909. 44

Like the Juntas de Inignacion, the Alianza Hispano-Americana was a combination of traditions and movements in Mexico and the United States. The Alianza grew out of the Mexican mutualismo, or the sociedad mutualista, movement. Mutualismo took hold in México during the reign of Porfiriao Diaz who ruled Mexico from 1876 until he was

Identity. The Mesilla Valley with its long active history of migration from and into Mexico would have fit into this demographic profile.

overthrown by revolution in 1910. As a perpetual president, he protected his interests and pursued the modernization and development of Mexico at all costs. Many Mexicans were, at best, excluded from positions of influence or, at worst, persecuted. Voices of opposition were silenced and opponents neutralized. In this milieu, some middle class Mexicans began forming themselves into self-help mutualist societies in the 1870s. The overarching goals of such organizations reflected various political ideologies, but all stressed the importance of cooperation, service, and protection. Over time, these organizations incorporated some working class Mexicans into their ranks. They also spread to the United States. At least six sociedades mutualistas existed in Tucson between 1886 and 1893. Carlos Velasco, the founder of the Alianza Hispano-Americana, had been a member of two of these societies.

The rise of fraternal insurance organizations, a trend associated with increasing immigration from Europe to the Eastern United States in the last decades of the nineteenth century, also influenced the Alianza Hispano-Americana. Several Alianza leaders, including Samuel Brown, who became the organization’s Supeme President in 1900, were also members of the Ancient Order of United Workmen (A.O.U.W).46

The A.O.U.W. was the first fraternal order that provided life insurance and had a national scope. The order’s roots were firmly placed in the working class movements of the late nineteenth century. Organized after the Civil War by John Jordan Updike, a master railroad mechanic in Pennsylvania, the A.O.U.W. was planned as a more conservative


version of the Knights of Labor in which strikes would be avoided through cooperation and a “solemn bond” between management and labor. This was not to be. The provision of life insurance benefits, initially a scheme to attract members, came to define the order. This marked a change in fraternal insurance. Previously, fraternal orders focused on efforts to provide assistance to the sick. This was a secondary role for the A.O.U.W. Instead they focused on a rudimentary form of life insurance. Members were provided $1,000-$2,000 death benefit to cover funeral costs and support widows. The program proved quite popular and by 1902, the year the Alianza adopted fraternal ritual and life insurance as part of its organizational core, the A.O.W.U. had almost half a million members.47 In this sense the Alianza, like the Juntas de Indignacion, was a hybridization of influences and traditions emanating from Mexico and the United States. Like the Juntas de Indigancion, the Alianza de Hispano Americana, focused its efforts on the preservation of Hispanic influence and Mexican traditions. The surviving records of the Las Cruces branch of the Alianza de Hispano Americana do not address the water shortage.48

Like the organizations and movements protecting Hispanic interests in the valley, Fabián García embodied this hybridization of cultures and traditions. He also represents the interplay of resistance and reform in the Mesilla Valley. As a scientist and educator, he promoted the modernization of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. He pursued research that


48 The only Las Cruces Alianza de Hispano Americana records I was able to locate are contained in the personal of the papers of Fabián García. They are located in Box 4, Folder 2: Alianza Hispano Americana 1908-1942, Fabián García Papers.
would make valley crops more robust and marketable, thereby prioritizing commercial agriculture over subsistence. In addition, García actively sought to preserve and protect the interests and culture of Hispanic farmers. He did this most visibly as an officer with the \textit{Alianza Hispano-Americana} and through his research in chile cultivation. Like many of his peers, such as Albert J. Fountain Jr. and Isidoro Armijo, the professor also reflects the interethnic traditions of the Mesilla Valley. Indeed, interethnic interaction and, for many, identity shaped popular discourse and politics in the Mesilla Valley in the last decades of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth century. The popular protests of the 1880s and 1890s did not confine themselves to racial and ethnic lines. This is evident in the Hispanic initiated and interethically attended \textit{Juntas de Indignacion}, which were often protests against newcomers and outsiders who did not have the community’s interests in mind. This division was represented in conflicts over water as the shortage became more acute in the 1890s. Conflicts over water were not ubiquitous, but they became more common as water became more scarce. Concerns over water were incorporated into a tradition of popular political expression and cultural preservation efforts that, by the 1880s, borrowed from both Mexican and American practices. Residents also confronted economic and cultural strain through fraternalism. This is most clearly reflected through the formation of the \textit{Alianza de Hispano Americana}.

Parallel to the protests and community preservation efforts were endeavors to save the Mesilla Valley through reform. New institutions reified the importance of agriculture in the region. This is reflected by the establishment N.M.A.&M.A. and the experiment station. To be sure, the college and experiment station were not merely symbols of agricultural importance. Established within a reformist context, the institutions were vanguards of
modern agriculture that brought the federal government into the region, albeit in a small way. Perhaps fittingly, Fabián García, a migrant from Mexico, became one of the institutions’ most visible and vibrant leaders, both within the community and academy. His professional and personal life both reflected and shaped valley agriculture and community. He and his contemporaries used resistance, reform, and interethnic cooperation to both protect tradition and local influence, and pursue the progressive modernization of the Mesilla Valley.

The most powerful force for progressive modernization, however, came from outside the valley. Just as developers and irrigators in Colorado generated the water crisis, a solution came as a result of downstream protests over the lack of water. By the late 1880s, a multilayered battle over water was brewing on the periphery of the valley at the end of the nineteenth century. It was a conflict that brought modern reclamation to the Mesilla Valley and would transform farming in the region.
Chapter 4: Reclamation

The availability of water became part of a larger tradition of resistance and reform in the Mesilla Valley by the 1880s. Residents resisted the plans of newcomers and outsiders that did not serve their interests. This was reflected in the protest and recalcitrance over speculative water development schemes of the Mesilla Land and Irrigation Company and the Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company in the 1890s. Local citizens also pursued reform. Concerns over water were subsumed into a movement to establish a land grant college and agricultural experiment station in the Mesilla Valley. Both reform and resistance were locally based and led movements.

The Mesilla Valley, however, was not a world unto itself. It was at the center of an international conflict over water in the waning decades of the nineteenth century. The controversy became a diplomatic challenge for the United States and the farms and residents in the Mesilla Valley were at the cusp of efforts to end the controversy. Mesillaros opposed and embraced solutions as they affected their well-being. Ultimately federal reclamation, supported by local farmers, provided the end to the water crisis and international conflict. Reclamation, based on an ideology that stressed both modernization and traditionalist agrarian values, brought dependable water to the valley.

International conflict, however, preceded reclamation. The drought manufactured by development in Colorado did not confine itself to geo-political boundaries and by the late 1880s residents in and around Ciudad Juarez and El Paso, Texas were suffering from an almost total lack of water just like farmers in the Mesilla Valley. Residents on both sides of the river began clamoring for a solution. Mexicans, in diplomatic correspondence, argued
that flows from the Rio Grande, an international stream, should be equitably divided between Mexico and the United States and that both federal governments had a responsibility to ensure the equitable distribution of waters. The Mexican government, moreover, claimed water rights “antedating even the written history [of the countries].”

The El Paso City Council took the proactive step of hiring Major Anson Mills, a retired engineer with the 10th Calvary who resided in the town, to examine the water situation and recommended a solution that would ensure an adequate, equitable water supply to residents in El Paso and Ciudad Juarez. Mesilla Valley was not their concern. Mills, working with Mexican engineer Ygnacio Garfias, completed his report in 1888. He proposed that the federal governments of the United States and Mexico fund the construction of a large dam and reservoir just upstream from El Paso. This plan presented problems for the farmers of the Mesilla Valley. First, the reservoir behind the dam was expected to be fifteen miles long and six miles wide. It would submerge over 25,000 acres of irrigable land in the valley and convert almost as much to useless marshland. Second, a reservoir at the bottom end of the Mesilla Valley would do little to alleviate the water scarcity in the Mesilla Valley around Mesilla and Las Cruces. New Mexicans protested Mill’s plan and countered that a reservoir or canal constructed north of the Mesilla Valley was a much more viable alternative. In fact, without such a project local farmers would be


2 House of Representatives, Irrigation of Arid Lands, Pg 7; United States Senate, Report of the Special Committee of the United States Senate on the Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands, Volume III: Rocky Mountain Region and Great Plains, 51st Cong., 1st Sess., 1890, Senate Report No. 928, Pgs 18, 59, 83-4, 90; United States Senate, Equitable
ruined. Two years later Mills’ proposed dam was under consideration by the United States Secretary of State’s office where it would die a slow death over the next decade.

Meanwhile, Nathan Boyd and the investors in the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company were speculating that they were going to make a fortune in the Mesilla Valley (see Chapter 3). Most Mesilla Valley farmers balked at Boyd’s speculative ambitions. They were unwilling to agree to the terms he placed on water rights under his plan. Boyd asked that farmers pay and annual water rental and pledge half of their land to him. Local residents, however, supported the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company proposal for an upstream dam near Elephant Butte, about one hundred miles north of the Mesilla Valley. They supported the Elephant Butte dam because it preserved their access to water, at least in principal, and did not threaten their fields with inundation.

Mexicans downstream, on the other hand, saw no value in Boyd’s plans. They were furious and still without water. The construction of a private dam and reservoir upstream was more than they could bear. Using a long-standing tradition, they petitioned their government for redress. In October 1895, a year after the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company was organized, Mexico’s Foreign Minister Matias Romero, sent a letter to the United States Secretary of State, Richard Olney. He complained that residents in and around Ciudad Juarez were suffering from an almost total lack of water and the international law

______________

and treaties required that the United States provide equitable flows to Mexico. These treaties had not been met. The Foreign Minister’s letter effectively triggered legal action that placed the plans of the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company in limbo.

Though the Attorney General of the United States dismissed Romero’s claims, Secretary Olney ordered the International Boundary Commission to conduct an investigation of conditions along the Rio Grande. W.W. Follett was placed in charge of the hydrologic survey, which was an exhaustive analysis of current and historical flows of the river and the effects of irrigation on river hydrology. Follett produced data on every ditch from the San Luis Valley through the El Paso Valley and determined that development in Colorado had severely undermined the natural flow of the Rio Grande. The report, completed in 1896, also addressed the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company’s proposed reservoir at Elephant Butte. Follett bluntly states that the dam proposed by Mills, which was still under consideration as the most appropriate way to address the international water conflict, and the dam proposed by Boyd could not coexist. He argued that United States must “find any way to control the storage of water at Elephant Butte.” This was a

---

3 Matias Romero to Richard Olney, October 21, 1895, in United States Department of State, Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States Transmitted to Congress with the Annual Message of the President, December 3, 1894 (Washington DC.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1895), Pgs 395-97; Clark, “The Elephant Butte Controversy,” Pg 1018. Boyd proposed a solution to the government’s concerns over equitable flow. He stated that the Rio Grand Dam & Irrigation Company would be happy to provide water to Mexico at a cost of $250,000 per year for twenty years. Water users in Mexico would be charged a $1.50 per acre annual fee, just like farmers in the United States.

thinly disguised assertion that Boyd’s project should be killed. 5 It also reflected his contention that the federal government should manage the water crisis, not a private company.

Olney, armed with Follett’s report, began to pursue the cancellation of a Right of Way previously granted to the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company for the construction of their dam. He worked through administrative channels and received support but no definite action. Alternatively, in association with Romero, he drafted a compact (international water treaty) barring the interference of appropriated flows of the Rio Grande. The compact reached President McKinley shortly after he entered office. The President refused to ratify it, fearing that the treaty would undermine New Mexico’s economy.6 Olney finally adopted a legal strategy. He argued that the Rio Grande was navigable above El Paso. With a determination of navigability, Olney could prevent the private company from constructing their dam and reservoir at Elephant Butte because any obstruction of a navigable stream required the approval of the War Department. The Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company had no such approval and in May 1897 the United States requested and received an injunction against Boyd’s company. The assertion of navigability was weak, but it served to tie the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company project up in litigation for over a decade.7

________________________

5 Follett, “Irrigation on the Rio Grande,” Pg. 188.

6 Clark, “The Elephant Butte Controversy,” Pg 1023.

The debate over the location of the dam and reservoir was reflected in regional terms. New Mexicans, including those in the Mesilla Valley, saw the legal and administrative battles over the impoundment of Rio Grande water as a reflection of the territory’s inferior status to Texas. In the context of the inter-regional and international water conflict they supported the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company, even though it was under British control, speculative, and did not serve the interests of most farmers. None of this mattered as much as the fact the private company's plans preserved New Mexico’s access to reserved irrigation water. It also did not directly threaten Mesilla Valley land with inundation. The Mesilla Valley dam proposed by Mills and supported by the United States did not protect such access. The conflict recast the local resistance against speculation and newcomers in a different light. While most residents were opposed to Boyd’s enterprise, they saw Mills and his El Paso allies as a greater threat. Support for Boyd pivoted precariously on the danger Mills’ reservoir presented to local farmers and New Mexican’s access to water. Support was not subscription. Very few Mesilla Valley farmers ever met Boyds’ demands for money and land.  

Other solutions were entertained. A local movement arose in 1901 to address the water crisis. Local Hispanic and non-Hispanic farm owners met publicly on Saturday October 4 to discuss the water crisis and develop a strategy to assure a more dependable supply of water. They formed an advisory committee to determine the best ways to improve the existing irrigation system in the Mesilla Valley. Proposals included the

8 Littlefield, Conflict on the Rio Grande, Pg  57; United States Senate, Waters of the Rio Grande, Pgs 195-96.
consolidation of the *acequias* in Las Cruces, Dona Ana, and Mesilla in order to streamline the distribution of water. Most attendees urged the improvement of the existing system of ditches, including the construction of a new *acequia madre* and other ditches, prior to the impoundment of water. Some residents stated that they were uncomfortable with the idea of any new dam on the river. International and interstate conflicts over water are not mentioned. There was no specific discussion of Boyd’s or Mills’ proposals. The meeting reflects historical trends in the Mesilla Valley. Local residents came together as an interethnic group in a public meeting to address a crisis. They, moreover, proposed practical solutions that were locally based and locally controlled. There was a distinction between support for Boyd as a reflection of territorial pride and support of Boyd as a solution to their water woes.

Less than a year after the October meeting, the political and legal landscape affecting the water dispute changed dramatically. The passage of the 1902 National Reclamation Act (Newlands Act) created path to a progressive state-based solution to the crisis. The Act, supported by local residents, was designed to enable the expansion and survival of small scale farming in the West. The legislation was fairly simple, but it firmly recognized the federal government’s role as the primary developer of irrigation in the West. It established

9 Francisco Figueroa “La Irrigacion en el Valle,” *Labrador*, October 18, 1901, Pg 3; Junta De Cuidadanos Consolidacion de Las Acequias de Las Cruces, Mesilla, y Dona Ana,” *Labrador*, October 4, 1901, Pg 2; Francisco Figueroa “La Irrigacion en el Valle,” *Labrador*, November 8, 1901, Pg 3; “New Era in Irrigation Promised,” *Dona Ana County Republican*, October 5, 1901, Pg 1.

a fund from the sale of public lands in sixteen western states to pay for the construction and maintenance of irrigation works for the “storage, diversion, and development of waters” in the arid and semiarid lands in the West. The Department of Interior was instructed to conduct surveys to determine the practicability, feasibility, and affordability of major irrigation projects and when a project was proposed, the Secretary of the Interior had the authority to withdraw all public land within the project from entry until completion of the irrigation system.¹¹

There was also a reformist component. It was intended to serve the individual farmer. In an effort to curb speculation, the Secretary of the Interior could limit the amount of land a person could claim within the areas served by federal irrigation. He was expected to limit the size of parcels to an acreage that allows “the support of a family.” In another effort to stem speculation, farmers were required to actively devote at least half their acreage to active agricultural development. In other words large speculative land-holding schemes were discouraged because the land had to be put to productive use. Second, water would only be provided to people who were bona fide residents on the land. Finally, the right to use water would not be provided to any single landowner holding more than 160 acres.¹²

Even though the projects were to be federally constructed and administered, local control and involvement was codified in the law. First, farmers were required to pay back


¹² *National Reclamation Act*, § 4-5.
the costs of construction through annual assessments over ten years. This gave local residents a financial stake in the project. Second, once the project was paid for, the management and operation of the ditches and other irrigation works would pass to the irrigators who were required to form themselves into, ostensibly democratic, irrigation districts. The federal government would continue to manage and operate the dams and reservoirs. The Reclamation Act reflected a growing federal presence in the West, but unlike the Mills and Boyd plans, it stressed local involvement and input. For this reason, the Act was not significantly opposed in the Mesilla Valley.

The Reclamation Act was used in New Mexico to quell international conflict before it was applied to rescue farmers. Shortly before the Act passed, the United States Geological Survey sent A. P. Davis to survey the Rio Grande in an effort to overcome the stalemate over water impoundment and apportionment. Davis was not a disinterested observer. He had experience in the region and also played a role in the crafting of the Newlands Act. Davis expressed a core view that central planning and federal supervision should characterize reclamation projects, but control over the projects should be local. This dichotomy came to define reclamation, both in statute and practice. Local control often conflicted with federal supervision. Local interest was not always the same as that of the engineers and reformers. Conflicts that resulted from this dichotomous relationship served to shape the ways reclamation projects affected local communities, including those in the Mesilla Valley.

\[13\] National Reclamation Act, § 6.

\[14\] Arthur Powell (A.P.) Davis was a nephew of John Wesley Powell.
Though many expected Davis to support the Federal Government’s preferred site at the bottom end of the Mesilla Valley, Davis after examining various sites along the river, proposed another dam site. He considered both the Mesilla Valley dam site and the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company site inadequate to serve the needs of the El Paso and Mesilla Valleys, and Mexican claims. Davis’ recommended site was just downstream from the original Elephant Butte site selected by Boyd. The new site, he argued, allowed for the construction of a much larger dam creating a narrow, deep reservoir that was less likely to suffer from evaporation problems that were probable with the other reservoir plans. Moreover, the impounded water would inundate rugged, mostly unoccupied, un-irrigable land. This would mitigate one of the major concerns Mesilla Valley residents had with the Mills site. Fertile valley lands would be saved for current and future use. New Mexicans threw their support behind Davis’ proposal. They were, ultimately, less interested in protecting the interests of a private company than preserving their right to water and protection of their farms.

Events moved quickly. The Service conducted additional surveys of the Rio Grande from 1903 into 1904. Meanwhile, Mesilla Valley residents began pledging to repay the government for construction of the dam, as stipulated by the Reclamation Act of 1902. Support for the project was nearly unanimous among Hispanic and Non-Hispanic residents.

15 This was only partly true. Several small subsistence based Hispanic farming communities were inundated by the reservoir. See John P. Wilson, “How Settlers Farmed: Hispanic Villages and Irrigation Systems in Early Sierra County, 1850-1900,” New Mexico Historical Review 63:4 (October 1988): Pg. 335.

16 “Otero’s visit to Las Cruces,” Santa Fe New Mexican, July 20, 1904; Littlefield, Conflict on the Rio Grande, Pg. 97; Clark, “The Elephant Butte Controversy,” Pg. 1028-1029.
Local Spanish language newspapers, moreover, regularly reported on the plans being developed by the engineers and the federal government. There was, nevertheless, some unease among the Hispanic small-scale farmers. They were concerned that water fees would undermine their subsistence. However, only the most ardent New Mexico supporters of Boyd and his enterprise presented steadfast recalcitrance. The principals of the Rio Grande Dam & Irrigation Company continued their legal battle with the United States, but sentiment and legal decisions were allied against them by 1902.

Meanwhile, continued agitation by the Mexican government for a solution to the water conflict spurred the Reclamation Service to act more quickly than it might normally have. The frustration of residents of Ciudad Juarez had not cooled over the years since the international controversy erupted in the 1880s and in June 1904 Mexican Foreign Minister Manuel de Aspiroz sent yet another letter to the United States urging the immediate settlement of Mexican claims with legislation or payment. Secretary of State John Hay suggested that the Mexican claims could be met when the Department of the Interior approved Davis' proposal. In fact, the reclamation project was seen as a way to assuage the water conflict and provide for equitable flows to New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico.  

17 Clark, “The Elephant Butte Controversy,” Pg. 1029-1030; La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 82; Frank E. Wozniak and USDA Forest Service, Rocky Mountain Research Station, “Irrigation in the Rio Grande Valley, New Mexico: A Study and Annotated Bibliography of the Development of Irrigation Systems,” RMRS-P-2 (Fort Collins, CO: USDA Rocky Mountain Research Station, September 15, 1997), Pg. 91; “Proyecto de Regadio,” Labrador, August 12, 1904, Pg. 1; “Deposito de Agua en el Rio Puerco,” Tiempo, August 6, 1904; Pg. 1; “Pasa el Senado,” Labrador, June 20, 1902, Pg. 1; “For Irrigation,” Las Cruces Progress, April 4, 1903, Pg. 1.

18 Littlefield, Conflict on the Rio Grande, Pg. 112.
Meeting at the International Irrigation Congress in El Paso, Texas in 1904, representatives of New Mexico, Texas, and Mexico agreed that the construction of a large dam and reservoir by the United States, north of the Mesilla Valley was the appropriate solution to their water woes. They pledged their support to a plan that guaranteed water for 100,000 acres in New Mexico, 20,000 acres in Texas north of El Paso, and 50,000 acres on both sides of the river south of El Paso/Ciudad Juarez.\(^1^9\)

A regionally based Reclamation Service engineer named Benjamin Hall played a prominent role in securing the support of all parties. Prominent New Mexico delegates, including Mesilla Valley banker, George Bowman, were directly involved in crafting the compromise. Indeed, historian Douglas Littlefield argues that the ultimate solution to the water crisis in the Mesilla Valley was the product of a core group of progressive residents in the Mesilla Valley and El Paso. They, like other advocates of federal reclamation, professed an ideology that stressed the importance of government control and scientifically directed development of natural resources in place of private, or even state, control over the development of major irrigation projects. Congress approved the Rio Grande Project on February 25, 1905 and federal reclamation came to the Mesilla Valley.\(^2^0\) The project, born of international and regional conflict, eventually transformed the valley.

On its most basic level, the approval of the Rio Grande Project ended an international controversy and promised to bring water to struggling farmers. It, no doubt,

\(^1^9\) Littlefield, *Conflict on the Rio Grande*, Pg. 112.

\(^2^0\) Littlefield, *Conflict on the Rio Grande*, Pgs. 52, 62.
provided the hope for security and predictability. The project promised to make the land productive through the construction and modification of dams, canals, acequias, and impoundments. The Engle dam, approximately 100 miles upstream from the Mesilla Valley, was designed to be 301 feet high and 1,674 feet long. The reservoir behind it would eventually hold over two million acre-feet of water. Smaller, but no less significant diversion dams were quickly constructed in the valley itself. These structures, along with canals and ditches, were the physical manifestations of a modern reformist vision that shaped early federal reclamation projects. Indeed, the advent of federal reclamation in the Mesilla Valley brought much more than water. In the eyes of many, it was to be an engineering triumph in which nature was put to use to serve the people of the region.

The project, however, had much greater implications than merely storing and moving water. Reclamation was as much about social engineering as dam building. To be sure, the Rio Grande Project was one of a handful of early reclamation projects in which reform minded officials strove to re-envision western resources and put them to productive use. The projects also reflected efforts to preserve the small farm and alleviate the problems of overcrowded cities. Some activists even saw federal reclamation as a solution to urban crisis and labor conflict. Passage of the Reclamation Act in 1902 and the establishment of the Reclamation Service definitively asserted both these social reform tendencies and an overarching faith in engineering and modern science put to progressive use.

The Mesilla Valley water crisis and ensuing international conflict occurred concurrently with an ideologically complex national movement agitating for federally
supported reclamation. Inexplicably, the region was on the periphery of the discourse advocating reclamation. National reclamation proponents did not readily see opportunity in the Mesilla Valley. Leading national supporters of irrigation, in fact, ignored the region’s Hispanic population and its well-developed history of irrigation. Just as the water conflict shaped events in the Mesilla Valley, the reformist ideologies that dominated the discourse agitating for federal reclamation bore directly on the manner in which federal engineers approached and envisioned the valley and ultimately the manner in which reclamation was implemented. It is, therefore, imperative that one understand the intellectual roots of federal reclamation, especially as it relates to social reform.

The philosophical foundation for federal reclamation began nearly two decades before the approval of the Rio Grande Project. An early vocal proponent of federal reclamation was William Ellsworth Smythe, a young journalist from New England who relocated to the Midwest. Climate and circumstance collided in the 1880s sending him on a path in which he promoted irrigation with a level of motivation that approached religious zeal. Smythe was living and working in Kearney, Nebraska in the late 1880s as drought descended on the region. The drought, which also contributed to water shortages in the Mesilla Valley, compounded by unusually harsh winters, was extremely destructive. Plains cattle ranchers suffered; losing, on average, about thirty percent of their herds. Some lost nearly all their cattle. In the spring, cowboys were greeted with the rotting corpses of livestock that had perished on the range. Farmers were in no better position. They depended on rain to sustain their crops and when storms failed to materialize, fields became desiccated. As a consequence, formerly thriving agricultural communities lost up to half their population to the drought as farmers gave up and moved on to what they hoped
were more secure futures elsewhere. Many returned to the Eastern communities from where they originally migrated. 21

Smythe was deeply disturbed by what he saw. Using his pulpit as an editor he appealed for food, money, supplies and other assistance for farmers and ranchers struck by drought. Smythe also took a fateful trip in 1889. He traveled across Colorado and northern New Mexico on his way to California. In Hispanic settlements, such as Las Animas and Vermejo New Mexico, where irrigation was well developed, he saw thriving communities and farms, in contrast to the desperation he witnessed in Nebraska. Smythe became convinced that irrigation was a salve to the problems of environmental capriciousness. He became an ardent promoter of federal reclamation. 22 He was convinced that reclamation was a powerful social tool that could not only rescue farmers, but could redeem democracy, cooperation, and community.

Smythe quit his newspaper job in 1891 and began organizing a movement that helped shape the debate over federal reclamation. First, he organized an annual convention that called for a federal or state role in the development of irrigation. The first National Irrigation Congress was held in Salt Lake City, September 15-18, 1891. Delegates from nearly every arid western state were in attendance. New Mexico’s delegation included Ralph E. Twitchell, mayor of Santa Fe, who helped organize the congress. The first


irrigation congress was not widely publicized in Mesilla Valley newspapers, but the congresses continually became more important. The annual meeting became pivotal in 1904 in securing a solution to the manufactured drought when reclamation engineer Benjamin Hill and delegates from Texas, New Mexico, and Mexico crafted a water apportionment compromise that enabled the approval of the Rio Grande Project. In general, however, the congresses were contradictory affairs. Delegates professed social reform, but also embraced corporate and speculative interests. They represented the views of reformers on one hand and the hopes of a coalition of railroad companies, cattle companies, and developers who saw opportunity in reclamation on the other.23

This contradiction was also evident in Smythe’s publications. The same year he organized the first National Irrigation Congress, Smythe launched a new publication called Irrigation Age, which served to promote reclamation. The periodical was a reflection of the ambivalence that came to shape the development of federal reclamation. Irrigation Age promoted Smythe’s vision of irrigation as reform, with a caveat. The magazine was significantly funded by advertising dollars from land development companies and farm implement manufacturers. For this reason, articles were usually directed toward investors, promoters, and potential settlers rather than actual resident farmers. The Mesilla Valley Irrigation Colony, another enterprise headed by Nathan Boyd (who was also a principal in the Rio Grande Land & Water Company) advertised in the Irrigation Age. There is little discussion of the water appropriation battle or the water famine in the Mesilla Valley. In

23 Pisani, To Reclaim a Divided West, Pg. 239.
fact, New Mexico discussions are focused on developments near Carlsbad, New Mexico; an irrigation project dominated by private development interests and Non-Hispanic settlers.24

Even with the undeniable influence of speculators and developers in the movement he led, Smythe retained a vision of redemption through irrigation. He argued that irrigation had the power to re-make men and that it would ensure “industrial independence for millions of the freest men who ever walked the earth.” He envisioned a “republic of irrigation” shaped by “justice,” “equity,” and “independence.” Reclamation, in his mind, was the solution to problems stemming from overpopulation, land scarcity in the humid East, and homelessness. 25 Smythe’s rhetoric bordered on fanaticism and, by 1895, he had alienated many of his fellow irrigation activists. The irrigation congresses still met every year, though the dominance of western boosters and promoters became more apparent.

Smythe retained his fervor and moved on to other irrigation related pursuits. With the nation in the grips of economic depression, Smythe traveled to Boston and Chicago in


the winter of 1894-5 to recruit settlers and raise money for a colonization project in Idaho. The colony was located on idle land formerly owned by a private irrigation development company that went bankrupt. He hoped the colony, named New Plymouth, would prove that irrigation could shield communities from economic and environmental unpredictability. It was also an experiment in social engineering. Settlers received two plots of land. They acquired twenty-acre farms on the edge town and one acre lots in the town where they could reside. This was, somewhat ironically, very similar to the way land was distributed in the original community land grants that the Mexican government provided to settlers in the Mesilla Valley. Smythe was able to recruit twelve pioneering families from Chicago, but the experiment was doomed to failure. There were never enough settlers to make the settlement economically viable. Moreover, those who did move to New Plymouth shunned the community and chose to stay on their farms. Smythe was undaunted. In 1909 he established an agricultural colony on 550 acres near San Diego, California. He continued to press for reclamation as social reform. He noted that his project would “reclaim the social and economic wastes” that plagued American cities. While the settlement lasted for nearly a decade, it never thrived and by 1916 the colony was abandoned.26

Smythe, through all this, continued to promote reclamation through his writings. He wrote a multitude of articles for various publications, but his most enduring and influential

work was *The Conquest of Arid America*. First published in 1899, the book was revised and reprinted in 1905. Smythe’s narrative is germane to the Mesilla Valley in two ways. First, it is an exploration of the history of irrigation in the West and the cooperative communities that irrigation begat. Second, it is a direct, optimistic, assertion of the ways in which the desert, and America, could be redeemed by reclamation.

The author reasserts his core discursive argument that the reclamation of arid lands would serve as a refuge from the “over-grown and overcrowded cities and industries” of the East. In his view, irrigation was a social revolution that would remake the undifferentiated masses into cooperative, self sustaining, technologically modern, communities of small farmers where “intensively cultivated land, rich with its bloom and fruitage, with its spires and roofs, and with its carpets of green and gold stretching away to the mountains, it will be difficult . . . to say where the town ends and the country begins.” The federal government played a pivotal role in his vision and in the 1905 version of the book, he praised the efforts and intellects of federal reclamation engineers who “[opened] the door of arid America [while] the whole Nation [sic] looked on with enthusiastic approval.” Smythe predicted that their work would benefit millions of Americans.  

*The Conquest of Arid America* is replete with optimism promoting the productive potential of reclamation, but Smythe’s discussion of the history of western irrigation follows a racially narrow tack. Even though he describes his trip through the agricultural villages in northern New Mexico as the foundational moment in his irrigation crusade, he

neglects to discuss the history of Hispanic irrigation. Smythe, instead focuses his historical exploration of irrigation on Utah, Greeley Colorado, Southern California, and the Great Plains. Hispanic irrigation is consigned to insignificance in comparison Brigham Young’s “first canal built by a white man” that, according to Smythe, may have been inspired by God as much as influenced by Young’s observations of Hispanic and Indian irrigation. He celebrated the Greeley colony, established in 1869, as the beginning of irrigation in Colorado. He ignored the fact that Hispanic settlers developed irrigation in the San Luis Valley in the early 1850s. Again, he consigns Hispanic history to insignificance. Smythe’s treatment of Southern California just as perplexing. He writes that before the California Gold Rush, the region was “a desert of sagebrush and cactus, in which a few scattered mission gardens made charming oases.” It took the arrival of non-Hispanic Americans and their knowledge of irrigation to make the land productive. Irrigation on the Great Plains, in turn, was influenced by settlers from California and Colorado who learned irrigation in places like Greeley and Riverside. At every turn, Hispanic irrigators were written out of Smythe’s version of hydrologic development in the West.

Even more confounding is the fact that even though Smythe was a leader in the reclamation movement, the events in the Mesilla Valley, garner only a brief mention in the book, in comparison to the detailed analysis he provides of the vast irrigation development of the Pecos River valley in eastern New Mexico, an area with a large non-Hispanic population. In fact, Smythe’s discussion of New Mexico continues his diminishment of Hispanic agriculture. In his opinion, New Mexico was a place where Hispanic residents

“[lived] in serene peace and comfort upon the fruits of [their] unambitious efforts.” Further, New Mexico was a territory “whose greatness is of the future,” awaiting the influence of “American[s]” who will arrive with the development of irrigation. It is clear that the Americans of which he writes are not Hispanic.

Smythe was certainly not the only enthusiastic promoter of reclamation with a literary talent. George Maxwell, a California journalist and lawyer who specialized in water law became another forceful voice in the reclamation movement. Maxwell attended the 1896 International Irrigation Congress in Phoenix Arizona where he made an appeal for federal reclamation. Conferees, however, were not unified and like Smythe, he became disillusioned with the annual meetings. Within two years, Maxwell had distanced himself from the irrigation congress and was closely allied with Elwood Mead, head of the Department of Agriculture’s Office of Irrigation Inquiry. Mead would become director of the Reclamation Service in 1924.

Though Maxwell saw reclamation as a crusade to save American democracy, he walked a line between industry, speculation, and development and redemption of the working class and poor. His ideological outlook was firmly centered on reforming, or even rescuing, America’s working class, but he was also closely tied to the railroads. Between 1899 and 1905 Maxwell was paid by the Union Pacific, Northern Pacific, Santa Fe, Great Northern, and Southern Pacific railroad companies to mount a campaign to pressure Congress to enact legislation to develop federally funded reservoirs in the West. Executives

with the railroad companies saw Western water development as a tool to prevent future droughts, protect the value of railroad lands, and increase ridership of new settlers in furthering their goals to unite the East and West.30

Maxwell also established the National Irrigation Association in 1899. Based in Chicago, the association was broad in its scope, but focused in its purpose, which was to lobby for government supported irrigation projects as a tool for social reform. Maxwell adopted a multi-pronged strategy to secure federal reclamation legislation. He published magazines and pamphlets; wrote editorials for newspapers; distributed position papers throughout the nation; organized letter writing campaigns, and curried the favor of industrialists, businessmen, chambers of commerce, and trade associations. This was all done to meet his goal of alleviating the overcrowding of Eastern cities and making arid America productive. He was sure both goals could be met through federal reclamation. It was convenient that reclamation could also meet the economic objectives of the railroads and his own reformist goals.

Maxwell’s views on reclamation, however, were less pragmatic than those of his railroad company benefactors. On the most basic level, he saw reclamation as a tool for reform. He paid particular attention to the working class. Maxwell did not see traditional labor union concerns over wages and working conditions as the most constructive method by which to alleviate the problems of the working class. Maxwell, in fact, feared social upheaval associated with labor conflict. He argued that workers did not need wages as

30 Pisani, Water Land and Law, Pg. 102.
much as they needed self-sufficiency. He claimed that urban workers needed their own homes and a place to raise their own food. This, he argued, would alleviate labor conflict and worker misery. Like Smythe, Maxwell believed that by getting workers back to the land, they would be able to weather the fluctuations of a volatile economy.

Smythe and Maxwell did see the role of land ownership slightly differently. Where the former envisioned self-sufficient communities as the solution to social ills, the latter believed that farming could be a supplement to industrial work. Maxwell implemented his philosophy in a program called the homecroft movement. Homecroft stressed that workers should have one-acre plots on the outskirts of cities where they could raise their own crops, own a home, and yet be near enough to commute to work. Maxwell felt that labor conflict would melt away under such conditions and that “the working people of this country could be led right out into the daylight and made so intelligent, so clear-headed, so free from the . . . necessity of leaning on the labor agitator; so lifted above class hatred” that there would never be “another strike in this country.”

The Homecroft movement stressed a tradition in which the home was the center of production and consumption. This conservative vision reified the idea that morality, virtue and health were synonymous with the agrarian lifestyle, in contrast to the decay of urban life. In fact, even if one did not have a farm, he or she could practice intensive gardening on a city plot. Maxwell argued, however, that the federal government, through reclamation, should provide the means to pursue this way of life. In fact, it was the surest way to save

31 Maxwell, “Cost of Living,” Pg. 10.
America. He saw the passage of the Reclamation Act as an important piece of social policy that helped to preserve the family and home as a center of production and protection from the social ills of Gilded Age America.32

Maxwell put his ideas into practice in the early 1900s. He established two homecroft communities. The first was in Watertown, Massachusetts where he purchased 50 acres of land and sold it back to factory workers in one acre lots for about what they paid in rent. Residents were instructed on modern farming techniques and expected to raise their own crops. Maxwell’s second homecroft settlement was established on a 160 acre section of land in Arizona’s Salt River Valley where he had played a pivotal role in the securing one of the first federal reclamation projects in 1902. The Arizona homecrofters received plots of five acres and, unlike those in Massachusetts, they were not factory workers. Settlers, in fact, were required to be experienced farmers. The preference for experienced farmers became a common component of federal reclamation projects, including in the Mesilla Valley. Experienced farmers, moreover, were understood to be Non-Hispanic.

Maxwell’s vision of reclamation as a salve for working class conflict morphed into an experiment intended to show how reclamation could allow for the development of settlement consisting of prosperous “garden homes” on the margins of cities. These garden homes still reflected his vision of the home as the center of production, but they were less a refuge for factory workers than nascent suburbs. In essence, Maxwell was foreshadowing

the advent of suburban, avocational, farms. Maxwell’s homecroft experiments, however, never prospered. They were undermined by lack of funding.

Like Smythe, Maxwell was not interested in the contributions Hispanics had made to irrigation in the West. He was cognizant of the fact that Indigenous peoples had practiced irrigation in the region thousands of years before he began his own irrigation crusade. Still, in the spirit of Smythe, irrigators of the past were characterized as cultures in decline. He pays scant attention to New Mexico in his writings. The only editorial discussion of New Mexico in his Homecroft magazine, The Talisman, was an article condemning the ways in which land was managed in the territory and asserting that the land grants were an anathema to his principles. He did not see Hispanics as the “experienced” farmers he sought. The managers of the Rio Grande Project will voice a similar perspective.

Smythe and Maxwell were romantic agitators who saw reclamation as social reform. They were also closely linked to business interests, such as land companies, developers, and railroad companies. This represented an ingrained conflict. On the surface, the goals of railroad magnates and social reformers were incongruent. Smythe and Maxwell, however, were able to reconcile the two. After all, their social reform was, in part, a project to settle the West with new residents, not protect the interest of existing Hispanic (or other ethnic) communities. To them the West was a mostly blank slate in which non-Hispanic small farmers could find relief from the problems of industrial America.

33 “The Spanish Grant Incubus,” Maxwell’s Talisman, March 1906, Pg. 6.
Smythe and Maxwell influenced the debate for federal reclamation. While their stature suffered blows, partly due to their reformist persistence, the two men helped to shape the crusade for government supported reclamation in the West. Their efforts led to the development and passage of the Reclamation Act in 1902. Moreover, their ideological proclivities affected the ways in which reclamation was implemented in places like the Mesilla Valley. The activists’ marriage of concern over the preservation of the small farm as a conduit for reform and the interests of developers formed a core conflict in the implementation of the Reclamation Act. Their racial views were also present in Reclamation policy. Smythe and Maxwell, however, were not unlucky enough to have to wrestle with these contradictions and limitations. Some of their fellow reformers who became the engineers who formed the core leadership of the Reclamation Service were not so insulated.

Fredrick Haynes (F.H.) Newell, an important contributor to the development of the Reclamation Act, was a stalwart supporter of federal reclamation and the progressive ideals that formed its framework. Newell, an astute political strategist and career civil servant, was rewarded for his effort when he became the first director of the Reclamation Service. He was an ideal choice, having served as director of the USGS Hydrographic branch for over a decade. Newell was also active outside his role as a federal engineer. He was founding member and secretary of the National Geographic Society, former president of the American Forestry Association, and a participant in Smithsonian Institution endeavors. Many observers considered Newell the perfect person to further the reformist goals of reclamation. He was a well-known scientific progressive who generally agreed with the exhortations of Maxwell and Smythe. Newell, however, was not marked with the thinly
veiled promotional and speculative taint of his civilian contemporaries. He was the quintessential government expert who, reformers hoped, could affect social reform through irrigation. Newell noted that the goal of reclamation was take the struggling urban worker and place him and his family "on a 40 acre or 20 acre irrigated farm unit [where he will be] transformed politically and socially from a man, almost a danger to the community, to a citizen of the type that forms the foundation of strong, intelligent, democracy.” He believed modern science and even modern business practices could help ensure that this transition occur efficiently. Again the dichotomy of reclamation presented itself. Reformers like Newell were urging that a rural, agricultural, self-sustaining, American tradition was the solution to the social problems they saw around them. The tools and methods to implement this change were modern, scientific, and businesslike. Tradition was going to be saved by becoming modern. This became a core challenge for the Reclamation Service.

The small farm and modern business and scientific farming were rarely compatible. Newell reflects this ambivalence in his views of twentieth century farmers. He entered the Reclamation Service as a reformer, but became embittered towards the selfsame people he hoped to reform. He complained, in 1912, that settlers on reclamation projects were lazy compared to their industrious forefathers. He criticized them as abject failures who expected the Reclamation Service to do everything for them out of charity. Newell, who opposed government paternalism, argued that most problems the farmers encountered

were the result of their own failures and inexperience. No amount of government intervention, he felt, would change that. His resistance to provide aid put the Reclamation Service on a collision course with farmers throughout the West. Newell’s reluctance eventually forced farmers into conflict with the Reclamation Service.

Newell was based in Washington, D.C. where he could maintain an impersonal view of places like the Mesilla Valley. Like the journalists, he could view reclamation from the comfort of his office. It was easy for him to maintain reformist purpose and certainty. Reclamation engineers who spent time among farmers were in a less enviable position. They had to implement projects in cooperation with local populations. They interacted with farmers on a regular basis; many of the same people Newell characterized as failures.

Benjamin Hall fit into the latter category of reclamation engineers. Raised and educated in Georgia, Hall began working for the United States Geological Survey as a consulting engineer in 1896. It was in this capacity that he first visited the Mesilla Valley in 1902. Two years later, the Reclamation Service employed Hall as supervising engineer for New Mexico. Benjamin Hall was extremely critical of the Rio Grande Land and Irrigation Company, calling Boyd and his partners “wildcat promoters.” He argued, like A.P. Davis, that the private development plans should be barred and that the Reclamation Service construct a dam near the Elephant Butte site that Boyd had selected.


37 Littlefield, Conflict on the Rio Grande, Pg 77.
Hall and Davis traveled throughout New Mexico in the fall of 1904 to build support for the construction of the dam and reservoir. The engineers visited several communities, but their primary destination was the Mesilla Valley where they hosted a meeting at the Dona Ana County courthouse on 20 October 1904. Over 200 people attended the meeting and expressed their unanimous support for the Rio Grande Project. 38

A second meeting was held in Las Cruces in December after the 1904 International Irrigation Congress in which the compromise over water appropriations had been met, thereby allowing the approval of the Rio Grande Project. Hall and Davis wanted to consult with local farmers, the majority of whom were unable to attend the meetings in El Paso. The engineers sought to inform the residents of the compromise and the fact that it was likely that federal reclamation would come to the valley. They also wanted to prod the Mesilla Valley farmers into forming a water users association. The establishment of the association was the first step in implementing the reclamation project. Locally administered water management associations were responsible for securing the financial (through subscription) and personal support for reclamation projects. The association, originally called the Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association was also expected to, eventually, take the lead in managing irrigation in the Mesilla Valley. This was a cornerstone of Davis’ philosophy on federal reclamation. He wanted to preserve local control.

38 Littlefield, Conflict on the Rio Grande, Pg 103-4; Mesilla Valley Chamber of Commerce [Resolution], October 20, 1904, Box 818: Rio Grande 30-430A, Folder: 430 Rio Grande Project Elephant Butte WUA to December 1906, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN.
Nineteen Mesilla Valley delegates from all the farming communities in the valley and the general public gathered at the courthouse on December 21. Early in the meeting, they heard speeches by local elites and proponents of federal reclamation who addressed the crowd before the attendees organized a water users' association. Local residents, Cesario Pedragon and Jose Gonzalez, acted as interpreters. In the afternoon, college faculty addressed the assembly; so did local leaders, such as A.J. Fountain Jr. Regrettably the text of his and the other local speeches is unavailable. It is likely that speeches were made in both English and Spanish, as was typical at the time. Hall and Davis, however, were the star attractions. They hosted an informal discussion in the morning answering residents' questions and addressing their concerns. Hall delivered a formal speech in the afternoon. The text of his address was printed in a local newspaper.39 The speech reveals several themes that defined the Reclamation Service's goals in the Mesilla Valley, even if many were hard to achieve.

Hall states that the object of reclamation is not to make money for speculators, but to "make homes for the millions who are willing to toil daily for their bread" and escape a "precarious existence in the city." He continues on this theme and asserts that reclamation is a failure if it does not provide homes to the poor man who has no capital except his muscle and his intelligence." The views of Maxwell and Smythe are well represented in such sentiment. At the same time, Hall recognized that the valley was populated by large and small farms, absentee and resident owners, and Hispanic and Non-Hispanic farmers.

He, however, was adamant that the project serve all residents equally, including the “native Mexican, whose ancestors have cultivated the land for generations.” Hall compliments the valley’s Hispanic residents as ideal reclamation home-makers. Though his description is a bit superficial, he praises them as content farmers who are the most “industrious,” “law-abiding” people he has known. Indeed, reclamation, in Hall’s view, will benefit Hispanic farmers profoundly by making them successful farmers and ensuring their place as “a nucleus of a prosperous community that will be rapidly enlarged... by home seekers from the eastern states.” Hall was not consigning Hispanics to a past. Quite the opposite; he saw them as the center of the community. Unlike Newell, He had spent time in the Mesilla Valley and understood local realities better than his superior in Washington DC.

Hall’s speech stands out for its clear acknowledgement of Hispanic influence in the Mesilla Valley. Most early Reclamation Service observers of the valley were not explicit on racial demographics or the place of Hispanic residents in their effort to bring modern progress to the region. It is therefore difficult to determine whether Hall’s views were held by many of his fellow engineers in the first years of federal reclamation in the Mesilla Valley.

While little ink was wasted in early reclamation correspondence describing the Mesilla Valley’s Hispanic residents and where they fit into the engineers’ conceptions of the reclaimed valley, photographers were more revealing in their bias. Employed by the United States Geological Survey and, later, the Reclamation Service, they began recording valley

40 “Mesilla Valley Water Users are in Session,” December 22, 1904.
The photographs and their associated captions provide both discrete images and a glimpse into the ways in which outsiders conceived the valley. Images include fields populated by unspecified workers and humble crops. In some images, ruins dominate the foreground. Traditional Hispanic architecture is often consigned to the background of photographs where they almost blend into the horizon (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3). Non-Hispanic architecture, on the other hand, is prominently displayed. In at least one image, this architecture is equated with progress. A caption on a 1908 photograph of a large bungalow notes, inexplicably, that it is a “typical home in the Mesilla Valley” (Figure 4). This is perhaps the wishful thinking of a homesick photographer as the bungalow was not typical. One need only look at the margins of other photographs to see that flat roofed adobe structures were the dominant form of valley architecture before 1910. When identified, a “typical Mexican home,” was usually small and in disrepair, or even a jacal, a hut composed of sticks clad in mud, in contrast to the “fine homes” being constructed in the valley (Figure 5). While the caption author was silent on topic of who owns the homes, the implication is clear. These were homes of non-Hispanic settlers. The new homes represented progress, while the Hispanic homes reflected regression. In this manner the photographs reflected a fundamental tension that shaped the implementation of federal reclamation in the Mesilla Valley. Many of the progressive observers of the valley saw its future as a modern region populated by “experienced” (not Hispanic) farmers with

41 Figures follow this chapter.
distinctly Non-Hispanic tastes and traditions, not the interethnic society that had characterized life in the valley for half a century. 42

The images and Hall’s speech, in fact, encapsulate a fundamental condition that shaped the development and early implementation of reclamation in the West, including the Mesilla Valley. It was a movement marked by conflicting goals and confounding realities from the beginning. The ideological forbearers of the Newlands Act were determined reformers who saw federal reclamation as a salve to what they saw as the social and moral decline of America. The activists wanted to ameliorate the misery of the cities and the radicalism that they thought it bred. They were adherents of the immensely durable agrarian ideal in which a man with a little land can be independent, productive and content. It was, for many outside the valley, not an ideal into which resident Hispanic farmers fit. Local observers, such as Hall, understood the role Hispanics played in developing agriculture and managing irrigation in the Mesilla Valley. They knew that local Spanish speaking residents were not a relic. Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents, to be sure, spent the 1890s and early 1900s attempting to find their own solutions to the water crisis, keeping apprised of the international controversy that had the potential to undermine their livelihoods, and when a state based solution presented itself they, with limited reservations, embraced it.

42 This analysis is influenced by William Deverell who addresses similar themes in his study of in Los Angeles. Deverell argues that the development of Los Angeles was based upon an ideology that ignored, minimized, and sanitized the city’s ethnic Mexican population and history. See William Deverell, Whitewashed Adobe: The Rise of Los Angeles and the Remaking of its Mexican Past (Berleley, CA.: 2004).
Nonetheless, the impending federal reclamation project, for all it contradictions, represented a new powerful presence in the Mesilla Valley. It was not yet clear in 1905 whether the faith local residents, especially Hispanics, placed in the Reclamation Service was going to be beneficial. Rhetorically, reclamation held considerable promise. Those who heard Hall speaking in December 1904 must have felt that their livelihoods and even identity would be preserved and respected. The reformist ideologies of Maxwell and Smythe may have minimized the resident Hispanic populations in the West, but Hall’s words were the antidote to the journalists ethnic blinders. Most Hispanic and Non-Hispanic residents could be confident that the Rio Grande Project was the best of the three available solutions to the water crisis and ensuing international conflict that erupted in the 1880s. In fact, without the conflict, it is unlikely the project would have been approved.

The implementation of the Rio Grande Project after 1905 caused significant shifts in land tenure, infrastructure, demographics, and agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. Many of the changes were the result of the ambivalent philosophical underpinnings of federal reclamation. It was an experiment, for example, that embraced the small farmer, but preferred that the farmer was Anglo-American, even in a largely Hispanic region. Reclamation ideology stressed cooperation and local control, but local interests did not always reflect Reclamation Service interests. Finally, reclamation projects were expensive. This led to an increase in market based agriculture. The ways in which the challenges and dichotomies of reclamation were worked out in the Mesilla Valley dramatically affected local residents, Hispanic and non-Hispanic. For some, dependable water came at a cost beyond water fees. For others it was an opportunity.
Figure 1: “Irrigated Farming in the Mesilla Valley,” Ca. 1896 (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD)
Figure 2: Farm with Adobe Structures in Background, 1904 (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD).
Figure 3: Old Chamberino Church and Fields, Ca. 1904 (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 169: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD).
Figure 4: “Typical N.M. Home in the Mesilla Valley,” 1908 (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD)
Figure 5: “Typical Mexican Farm Home,” 1908 (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD).
Chapter 5: Change Comes to the Valley: Land 1905-1930

The Rio Grande project saved farming in the Mesilla Valley. Most residents welcomed the project as a solution to the water shortages they endured for two decades. Bringing dependable water to the Mesilla Valley was a testament to modern engineering in which water was stored and transported from over one hundred miles up river to fields and farms in the Mesilla Valley and farther south. It took over a decade to design, modify and construct all the dams, ditches and reservoirs required to make irrigation dependable. While portions of the project, notably the Leasburg diversion dam near Dona Ana, were completed earlier, the reservoir did not begin storing water until 1915 and the Elephant Butte Dam was not completed until 1916. The physical manifestations of modern irrigation, however, were only a small part of the transformation reclamation brought to the Mesilla Valley. One of the first major changes that the reclamation project precipitated was a shift in land tenure. Indeed, changes in land tenure are best viewed along two broad axes. First, there were the tangible changes in land ownership that occurred after the approval of the Rio Grande project. The second axis, which is less direct, is the ideological context in which federal reclamation was implemented in the Mesilla Valley. The two concepts worked together to structure the ways in which the Reclamation Service and local residents shaped the Rio Grande Project.

The reclamation project did not occur in a vacuum. It was implemented in a region in which residents, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, had long embraced various economic
strategies that reflected both tradition and transformation. Valley denizens were not blind to the events that occurred around them. They, after all, tapped into regional markets as early as the 1840s; resisted threats to their economic well being and cultural survival beginning in the 1880s; and welcomed the establishment of a land grant college and experiment station in the Mesilla Valley in the 1890s. Residents also retained long-held practices, including traditional migratory patterns and land use, and community based social organization. The Rio Grande Project, in this context, was an important development in the Mesilla Valley that presented both opportunities and threats to valley residents. In fact, reclamation had its first dramatic effects in the Mesilla Valley in association with land, not water. Local residents and Reclamation Service personnel shaped the manner in which the valley was settled between 1905 and 1930. The results, which included shifts in land tenure and increased demographic diversity, reflected the interplay of tradition, change, and unintended consequences.

The promise of a future in which the Mesilla Valley would become an agricultural oasis with reliable irrigation triggered dynamic changes in land tenure and demographics that began in 1905 and continued well after the dam was completed in 1916. Many local residents reacted immediately to the approval of the Rio Grande Project by selling their land. Indeed, the irrigation project resulted in changes in land tenure as soon as it was announced. Shifting land titles became apparent throughout the valley before the Reclamations Service ever constructed a single dam or government canal to convey water. Geographer Barbel Hannelore Schonfeld La Mar notes in her sampling of selected agricultural communities that beginning in 1905 land exchanges occurred at
unprecedented rates. These exchanges took place throughout the Mesilla Valley among Hispanic and Non-Hispanic farmers, including those who owned small pieces of land. It is tempting to conclude that the farmers were losing their land, but such an argument is an oversimplification, or perhaps, even, incorrect. In 1905 residents were typically not getting rid of their land under duress. Many of those selling property owned their land outright and held their farms while enduring the manufactured drought, which was about to come to an end. Instead of waiting for dependable water, they took advantage of an opportunity.

It was clear to everybody that when the project was completed land values would increase. Some small-scale farmers, many of whom were not isolated from the events occurring in the Mesilla Valley, hoped to make money off their property. The clearest evidence supporting this motivation is the fact that while land values were beginning to increase before the project was underway, tax assessments, the most common manner in which a small-scale farmer might lose his land, would not have been onerous yet. The Reclamation Service, moreover, had not yet implemented the annual water assessments on lands subscribed to the project. Indeed, subscription to the project was voluntary. If one could not afford the assessment one could opt out, though apparently few took this path.


2 United Reclamation Service, “Project History: Rio Grande Project – Texas - New Mexico From Inception to December 31, 1912, including Complete Construction of Leasburg Unit (Exclusive of Storage Unit), ” Pg. 18, Box 461: Rio Grande Volume I, 1913, Entry 10, RG 115, NARA-DEN.
After all, a non-subscribing farmer would not receive Reclamation Service water for his crops.

Therefore, in 1905 the project did not yet represent a financial hardship to farmers who had suffered through drought. These, usually small-scale, farmers and land owners who were selling their land were engaging in petty speculation. It appears that they had grown weary of farming, or were enticed by profit, and they sold their land. Some stayed in the rural farming villages. Others left the region, moved on to other farms in the valley, or relocated to regional urban areas, such as Las Cruces.

Of course, land exchanges were not merely the domain of the small farmer. Long-time elites and outside investors also saw opportunity in the newly energized real-estate market. Andres and Santiago Gonzalez, for example, purchased 600 acres from Catarino Armijo in 1906. The land, located near Piccacho was north of the ranch land they already owned near Mesilla.\(^3\) Armijo, a leading Mesilla Valley merchant and father of *Alianza de Hispano America* founder, Isidro Armijo, was not in financial distress. He was taking advantage of an increasingly robust real estate market. Andres and Santiago Gonzalez, moreover, purchased the land to support their own economic goals.

The Gonzalez family were part of the Hispanic elite in the region. They were established in the Mesilla Valley as early as 1867. Nine years later a break in the acequia flooded the home of Ramon Gonzalez, Santiago’s father, causing 1,000 dollars damage, a

---

\(^3\) “Locales y Personales,” *Eco Del Valle*, August 18, 1906: Pg. 3.
The family’s status in the region was tied to their position as ranchers, alfalfa farmers, and merchants. They dealt in trainloads of material. In one 1879 shipment, for example, they transported 12 carloads and 8 wagon loads of copper, and other unspecified goods to Clifton, Arizona and Las Vegas, New Mexico. It is likely that horses or cattle were included in the shipment. On other occasions Andres Gonzalez used trains to market horses throughout the region. His livestock, moreover, was considered, by at least one person, to be “comparable to” that which came from Texas. Like many New Mexican elites the Gonzalez family were intermarried with established Non-Hispanic families in the Mesilla Valley. Santa Fe newspapers carried the news of the marriage of Santiago’s daughter, Josefina, to Thomas Bull, the grandson of one of the first non-Hispanic settlers in the Mesilla Valley in 1897. Interethnic linkages among established elites were still important at the turn of the twentieth century.

Regardless of the intent of Andres and Santiago Gonzalez, many land sales were speculative. Speculation was common, though mostly small scale, in the Mesilla Valley in the first decade of the Rio Grande Project. Local residents with means were purchasing

4 [No Title] Eco Del Rio Grande, February 12, 1876: Pg. 7.


7 “Social Happenings. The Week’s Doings Among Well Known People,” Santa Fe New Mexican, July 31, 1897 (Volume 34: Issue 136): Pg. 4.
small plots throughout the valley in the hopes that settlers would arrive to purchase real estate once the Rio Grande Project made the land dependably productive.

Land sales and the anticipation of federal irrigation, no doubt, caused real estate values to skyrocket in the first five years of the project. Federal engineers noted that land values had doubled by 1910 and that new construction and “other evidences [sic] of prosperity [were] apparent.” The value of developed parcels in the northern reaches of the Mesilla Valley, where the effects of federal irrigation development were first felt, increased from 20 to 40 dollars per acre to 100 to 300 dollars per acre. Undeveloped land increased from as low as three dollars per acre to up to 40 dollars per acre.⁸

The changes in land values resulted in new challenges for local farmers. The increasing cost of land was becoming less conducive to a profit making strategy and more of a hardship that affected all farmers, especially those subsisting on small parcels. While 1905 may have represented an opportunity for besieged farmers, later years were often shaped by economic threats to land tenure resulting from increased land values, such as tax delinquency and mortgage defaults. A local observer noted that the approval and implementation of the Rio Grande Project had a dramatic effect on real estate values and many of the original Hispanic and non-Hispanic farmers who held land before 1905 were bought out. La Mar points out that most of the land was sold again before 1915 to new

⁸ “Project History. . . December 31, 1912,” Pg 20, 22.
investors and settlers. As prices increased the ability to make a small farm viable became more tenuous, unless “highly intensive and costly farming methods” were adopted.  

It would appear, on the surface, that these shifting land values and financial burdens overwhelmingy victimized Hispanic residents. After all, Hispanic farm ownership in the Mesilla Valley declined from over 50% of the arable acreage in the valley to less than 25% between 1905 and 1915.  

The first assumption would be that many of the Hispanic farmers lost land to foreclosure and tax delinquency. That, however, does not appear to be the case. During this period, Hispanic farmers were occupying land that had been in their families. Their tax and debt burdens were increasing, but, unlike Non-Hispanic settlers, they were not purchasing land on credit. Most of them did not have a mortgage to foreclose upon. Other financial pressures were confronted in a manner that Mesilla Valley residents had employed since the 1840s. Hispanic landowners often met environmental and financial distress through the division and sale of their holdings. This practice continued in the early years of the Rio Grande Project. Hispanic farmers attempted to maintain a foothold on the land, even as their holdings shrank. 

A second trend that began during the water shortages of the late nineteenth century also contributed to shifting land tenure. Fewer Hispanic children were interested in farming. By the early twentieth century, many Hispanic youth were turning away from

9 Director, Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association “The Elephant Butte Project,” October 26, 1915, Pg 4, Box 797: Miscellaneous January 1, 1913 thru June 30 1919, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN. 

farming and gravitating toward the more urban areas. Without heirs to manage the farms, their parents began selling and leasing their property to neighbors, speculators, and new residents. This strategy allowed a core of Hispanic residents to remain in the farming centers, such as La Mesa, La Union, Chamberino, and San Miguel while the land around them changed hands.

A 1916 survey of the Mesilla Valley conducted by the Reclamation Service provides a slightly better picture of farm demographics than La Mar’s statistical analysis. Most improved cultivated farms, the engineers note, were near established settlements. Elwood Mead ascertained that there were two classes of productive farms near the towns. First there were small-scale farmers who owned less than ten acres and were mostly Hispanic. Many of the Hispanic farms were quite small indeed, usually 1-2 acres. This is likely a reflection of the trends that La Mar notes where local Hispanic farmers were selling off sections of their farms to meet economic needs. The second class of farms included parcels of 10 to 400 acres. This category was composed of both Hispanic and non-Hispanic farmers. Mead was confident that both these types of farms were sustainable and that they took “full advantage of the soil and climate.” Most, if not all, this land was cultivated before the Rio Grande project was ever approved. Clearly the smallest farms were too small for any significant cultivation beyond subsistence. In order to meet greater financial burdens, some Hispanic residents found work on the larger farms of 160-400 acres that


were interspersed among their small farms, a trend that began in the 1880s.\textsuperscript{13} They also found employment in local communities.

There was a discrete difference in the ways in which established, often Hispanic, small-scale farmers maintained a connection to the land compared to the manner in which, mostly non-Hispanic, newcomers held land. Farmers who had lived in the Mesilla Valley prior to the approval of the Rio Grande Project typically attempted to stay in a specific location and, if needed, sold portions of their property. Many of the buyers were new settlers and investors in the Mesilla Valley, mostly Non-Hispanic, who provided a ready market for farmlands.\textsuperscript{14} This resulted in an increase of land held by Non-Hispanics, but does not reflect a wholesale land loss by established populations. The new settlers were less likely to remain on the land. La Mar points out that the majority of landholders in her sample areas sold their land in the first years of the Rio Grande Project. She notes that nearly 50\% of Hispanic agricultural plots changed hands between 1905 and 1914 while 76\% of farms held by Non-Hispanics changed hands in the same period. Hispanics whose land had been in the family for more than a generation were more likely to keep a portion of their property than the Non-Hispanics who were apt to sell their entire farm and move to the next promising plot. They also usually had a weaker connection to the community than longtime residents. New Non-Hispanic farmers also confronted more challenges than the established Hispanic farmers. Nearly all the early twentieth century Non-Hispanic

\textsuperscript{13} Elwood Mead, et al. to Franklin K Lane, February 9, 1916, 

\textsuperscript{14} Director, Reclamation Service to El Paso Valley Water Users Association, Box 818, Folder, Rio Grande 430-430A/430-A Rio Grande Joint Contract With Two Water Users Associations, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN.
settlers in the Mesilla Valley came from humid climates. Those who purchased land outside the community grants were also confronted with the difficulty of acquiring water. Many failed to comprehend the challenges irrigated farming presented and they sold or lost their land before they could make it productive. Also, unlike the Hispanic farmers, many of the new settlers depended on credit to finance their land purchases. Unable to pay their bills the farms went into foreclosure.  

Land tenure was mostly shaped by the exchange of small parcels, regardless of whether the sales were triggered by speculation or distress. Nonetheless, there were some significant large scale land exchanges in the first years of the Rio Grande Project. The Bracito Land grant had been subject to speculative enterprises since before the water crisis. The widow of Thomas Casad, who had acquired the majority of the 14,808 acre Bracito land grant in 1875, sold thousands of acres to the Valley Land and Irrigation Company in the 1880s. The Casad family regained the land in the later 1880s, after this enterprise failed. Bracito lands were sold again in the 1890s to the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company, another speculative dream doomed to fail. Finally, the Bracito Development and Power Company acquired over 8,000 acres in 1904. Within a year, these selfsame speculators acquired most of the remaining portions of the grant from other landowners. The investors were counting on the federal government to make the lands productive and make them personally wealthy.  

___________________________

15 La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pgs. 95, 163
16 La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pgs. 54-5, 91-2
The Bracito grant was unique in the Mesilla Valley. It was an empresario grant. Most valley land grants were community grants that were still comprised of small holdings held by individuals and families in 1905, making the acquisition of large tracts of desirable or developed land impractical for large scale speculators.\(^{17}\) The only exception to this condition was the Santo Tomas de Iturbide Colony Grant. Mariano Barela, beginning in the 1880s, began purchasing most of the individual tracts contained within the grant and by the late 1880s had acquired most of the grant. Barela died in 1892 and three years later, his mother, Rafaela sold the grant lands, most of which were unimproved, to a land development corporation, the Mesilla Valley Irrigation Colony, which was subsequently renamed the Mesilla Valley Real Estate Company. Nathan Boyd was a principal investor in this company and he surely considered it an accretion to the lands of the Mesilla Valley Land and Irrigation Company. The title of the lands was tied up in legal controversy and the company did not take possession of the Santo Tomas lands until 1905.

The Mesilla Valley Real Estate Company held their lands until 1914 at which time they were transferred to the Santo Tòmas Farms Company. The board of directors of the new company included O.C. Snow, a local farmer, politician and former classmate of Fabían García, and F. H. Gallagher, an investor from Santa Barbara California who also owned an interest in the Bracito Land and Power Company. The Santo Tòmas Company held 3,500

\(^{17}\) See Chapter One for definitions and descriptions of Mesilla Valley grants and grant types.
acres. The company did not market parcels to small farmers. The land was not cleared or subdivided.\textsuperscript{18}

The Santo Tòmas Company accrued significant debts to the EBWUA, Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) and Reclamation Service. Officials were forced to withhold water from the company until debts were paid in 1921. The company, moreover, complicated the construction of Reclamation Service canals. Inexplicably, representatives of the company opposed plans to build drainage canals across their land to relieve water-logging problems that became critical in 1918. Apparently, they felt slighted because they felt their lands were not given proper consideration in the development of Rio Grande Project irrigation ditches. The Reclamation Service and local irrigation district officers, however, were adamant that the land actually being farmed be drained before they provided water to the undeveloped lands of the Santo Tòmas Company. This intransigence was not a problem encountered among what one local resident called “the actual bona fide farmers.” The President of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (the successor to the EBWUA) predicted in 1918 that the United States would have to condemn land for the canal’s right of way.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} W.J. Stahmann purchased 2,800 acres of the Santo Tomas grant in 1925. Stahmann was a buggy maker from Wisconsin who emigrated to the region in 1909. He raised cotton and tomatoes near El Paso before purchasing the Santo Tomas property, which became known as Stahmann farms. Stahmann and his son Deane became internationally important farmers in the succeeding decades. La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 114.

\textsuperscript{19} La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 62; No Author, “Pulse of the Irrigation Industry,” The \textit{Irrigation Age}, Volume 6, Number 4 (April 1894), Pg 162; President Elephant Butte Irrigation District to A.P. Davis, July 27, 1918, Box 817, Folder Rio Grande 330B-348C/330 B Rio Grande Contracts with Elephant Butte Irrigation District, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN; President Elephant Butte Irrigation District to District
The examples of large-scale speculation addressed above reveal that there were local residents and outside investors speculating in Mesilla Valley real estate as early as the 1880s. The majority of land acquired by these large-scale speculators, however, was undeveloped and not served by existing acequias. After 1905, investors either simply held the land in anticipation of increased land values once the dam was completed, or performed some rudimentary land preparation and sold or rented land to new residents.

Considerable effort was oriented toward marketing. Promoting lands to new, especially non-Hispanic, settlers was not a practice that began in 1905. Promoters began advertising the Mesilla Valley as an agricultural oasis in the 1880s, but the expectation that federal reclamation would assuage the drought and the realization that land was becoming more valuable intensified the marketing of the valley to new groups of settlers. Real estate companies saw the Rio Grande project as a beacon for prosperity and profits. The link between federal reclamation and land speculation is made clear on the stationary of a local land development company. Prominently displayed at the top of the Elephant Butte Realty Company’s letterhead was an image of lush orchards and farms being watered by the snout of an elephant (an allusion to the Elephant Butte Reservoir that the Engle Dam would impound) that is standing on the “government irrigation dam.” Reclamation employees

chafed at such overt speculation.\textsuperscript{20}

The Reclamation Service, nonetheless, supported efforts to bring new settlers to the valley. Acknowledging that the Mesilla Valley had a long history of settlement by mostly Hispanic migrants, the Reclamation Service embarked on a program to bring new non-Hispanic settlers to the region. It was expected that these “practical farmers” would make uncultivated and underproductive lands thrive. Hispanic farmers were typically excluded from this consideration; even though they continued to operate the ditches and were often the labor that cultivated the farms of many of the newly arrived farmers who had no experience with irrigation.

Meanwhile, Hispanic migration into the Mesilla Valley continued to follow regional patterns established half a century before. Migrants most often traveled to the El Paso/Juarez area and then made their way north in search of opportunity, and once the Mexican Revolution erupted, refuge. As modes of travel became more efficient, so did migration. The community of Berino, on the east side of the Rio Grande at the southern end of the Mesilla Valley, was largely settled by Mexicans fleeing the revolution after 1910.\textsuperscript{21}

Hipolita Perez was another revolutionary migrant. She moved to Las Cruces sometime before 1916 with her children. Her husband, a farmer in Mexico, was killed by Pancho Villa’s raiding soldiers during the Mexican Revolution. She traveled by train from


\textsuperscript{21} Johansen, Sigurd, Rural Social Organization in a Spanish-American Culture Area (Albuquerque, NM.: University of New Mexico Press, 1948) Pg. 55.
the family farm in the Mexican state of Durango to Juarez. Once in El Paso, she took a bus to Las Cruces. With no money, she found employment as a housekeeper for the Frenger family, a job she kept for nearly three decades.\(^2\) Tragedy also spurred Cruz and Josefa Provencio Maya to leave Mexico. They were living in Juarez in 1907 when their five-year-old son was struck and killed while in the street. Josefa who was pregnant at the time, had a nervous breakdown. Doctors told Cruz Maya that he had to leave Juarez for his wife’s health.\(^3\)

Cruz and Josefa traveled to Clifton, Arizona where some friends gave them a free place to live and provided Cruz with a job working on their farm. This was his first experience farming. He had owned a store in Juarez. Cruz, his wife, and children stayed in Clifton for almost ten years before relocating to San Miguel in the Mesilla Valley. Again, the family relied on a friend who provided them with a house in town rent-free. According to Consuelo Marquez, Cruz and Josefa Provencio Maya’s daughter, most of the Hispanics in San Miguel had been there a long time. She noted that they all “had little cottages, then little bigger ones,” on their property. This was why migrants like Cruz Maya were able to find

\(^2\) Hipolita Perez, Interview by Jane O’Cain, March 27, 1996 & April 18, 1996, Interview # 3, Transcript, New Mexico Farm & Ranch Heritage Museum (hereafter NMF&RHM) Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.

\(^3\) Consuelo Marquez, Interview by Jane O’Cain, December 12, 1997, January 16, 1998, March 17, 1998, Interview # 204, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.
housing with relative ease by relying on kin and friendship networks. The new migrants, however, often had no land. They came as laborers and tenants.

The Mayas were not the migrants the Reclamation Service hoped to attract to the Mesilla Valley. The agency promoted the valley by proxy. The Reclamation Service encouraged the Elephant Butte Water Users Association to actively advertise farming in the Mesilla Valley and recruit settlers. The EBWUA, to this end, established an advertising and immigration office in 1912. Promotional advertisements were placed in “carefully selected mediums” in order to attract “experienced farmers of sufficient means to properly develop [the Mesilla Valley]” as opposed to what they characterized as the inefficient methods of the resident overwhelmingly Hispanic farmers.  

The EBWUA immigration bureau was discontinued in 1916 due to lack of interest and the unintended consequences of reclamation. The agricultural lands became waterlogged and the water user’s association decided that efforts should be expended on addressing the drainage of the lands before encouraging settlement. Concurrently, however, the Reclamation Service approvingly reported that the sugar beet crop showed promise. The Holly Sugar Company announced plans to build a factory in Las Cruces and colonization agents began recruiting experienced sugar beet farmers from Colorado and

24 Consuelo Marquez, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.

Arkansas to settle in the Mesilla Valley, which barring the current soil saturation challenges, they argued, will produce “bountiful” yields.  

The Reclamation Service ambivalence that attempted to balance development and social reform was pervasive among reclamation advocates in the region. A 1908 article in the El Paso Herald, a newspaper owned by Felix Martinez who was the president of the El Paso Water Users Association, blended the desire for real estate development with the reformist impulse. Claiming that there was room for 20,000 farms in the Mesilla Valley, the author stressed that “people who are barely eking out an existence in the more populated section of the country” can come to the region and prosper. The relationship was symbiotic. The Mesilla Valley would save the people from the perils of the city and the new settlers, in turn, would be “good citizens” and make the valley a place of “beauty,” “productiveness” and economic viability. In true speculative urgency, the article implored potential settlers to not wait for the dam to be completed. They needed to be on the land and ready for the water when it arrived. Apparently, there were not enough “good citizens” in the Mesilla Valley in 1908.

Reclamation Service engineers and activists were not only attempting to impose their vision of the ideal farmer upon the Mesilla Valley. They also had a vision of what settlement should look like which conflicted with the manner in which settlements were


traditionally structured in the Mesilla Valley. At times, local citizens resisted the subversion of their custom by reform minded outsiders. This became particularly acute in La Union, a town established informally on public lands in the late 1860s. The Reclamation Service tried to withdraw the lands encompassing the settlement from entry under the public land laws. In effect, the nearly 400 residents of the town were considered squatters. The community confronted challenges to their land holding in a manner that reflected the strategies that valley residents had used for decades. They came together in an interethnic group to let their interests be known and to make demands on the state, much like the residents of communities like Mesilla and Las Cruces had 1880s and 1890s to defend title to land grants.

The Reclamation Service protested, claiming that less than 40-acres of the almost 300 acre town site was occupied. Even worse, in the mind of the engineer reviewing the town site application, nearly 150 acres of the land was irrigable and could be developed into farmland that should go to families that would make the land more productive. Apparently the, mostly Hispanic, residents were, in the engineer's opinion, not capable of such a task even though they had recently financed and constructed their own irrigation ditch to Reclamation Service standards. The residents, on the other hand, considered the unoccupied lands their communal agricultural lands, in much the same way that many Spanish and Mexican Land Grants organized farm plots and communal lands outside the core of settlement. Ultimately the Reclamation Service decided to allow the approval of the town-site on one condition. The residents had to pay a fee of over eight thousand dollars to the Reclamation Service for project costs that would not be recouped if the irrigable land encompassed by the La Union town was not settled by farmers paying water duties. The
residents agreed and their town site was approved. The residents of La Union saw no separation between town and farm. The Reclamation Service, on the other hand, understood settlement differently. They saw the town and the farm as separate entities.  

Large areas of undeveloped land were marketed and sold while the La Union residents were fighting to preserve their community. The land development companies that gained control of the bulk of the Bracito and Santo Tòmas de Iturbide grants in 1905 embarked on their own programs to settle the Mesilla Valley. The Bracito Land Development Company was the more active of the two. The company began advertising its lands locally and in Western and Mid-Western states shortly after 1905. They made some effort to foster community by recruiting groups of settlers from the same geographical area. It took a few years for the land development company to attract settlers in large numbers. This may be due to various factors, including the fact that land was readily available in and near the older communities, such as Mesilla and Las Cruces. Settlement, however, became quite active by 1909. For example, forty-three families from the same part of Minnesota settled on the grant lands that year. Nineteen of the families were from the same county. By 1916, half of the Bracito lands were sold and the rest were sold by

---

1935. The town of Mesquite was also established on the grant.\textsuperscript{29} These were the types of activities that met with Reclamation Service approval.

Farms were offered in plots of 10 to 160 acres and were supposed to be cleared, leveled and made ready for cultivation by the company before they were settled.\textsuperscript{30} It is difficult to know if they were prepared in such a manner. There is considerable discussion in both Reclamation Service and EBWUA correspondence about the difficulty and expense new settlers faced in making the land ready for cultivation. While the Bracito lands are not specifically mentioned, it is clear that they were an area of concern. When the letters referred to speculators in the Mesilla Valley they were, by implication, addressing the Bracito lands and other similar, but smaller, operations.

Speculation presented an intellectual problem for the progressive engineers, even though they were encouraging real estate development and colonization. In some instances, the Reclamation Service went to great efforts to reconcile the existence of potentially speculative endeavors on project lands. In 1913 they approvingly noted that speculation had not become dominant on the Rio Grande Project, unlike many other Reclamation Service undertakings. At the same time, the engineers expressed concern about the presence of some large holdings in the Mesilla Valley, but accepted their existence as long as the lands were divided into smaller plots and sold off in a way that protected the settler “against inflated values,” and “discourage[d] prospective settlers from

\textsuperscript{29} La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 92

\textsuperscript{30} La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 92
undertaking the purchase of more land than they have the financial ability to pay for” and effectively farm. Reclamation Service engineers stressed that the lands needed to provide “the highest utilitarian value to the entire community.”

Walter L. Fisher, the acting Secretary of the Interior was less sanguine. In a 1913 letter to the EBWUA, he noted that the intent of the Reclamation Act was to bring water to lands that were practically useless without it. Once water became available, the homeseeker could either homestead public lands or purchase uncultivated lands for “a few dollars an acre” and “by his own skill and industry” support his family. Speculation, he added, was quickly becoming the overarching detriment to the realization of these goals and potential settlers no longer saw reclamation projects as an opportunity to improve their financial situation. The Secretary warned that speculators could be permanently denied access to water provided by the federal government. Moreover, their uncultivated and unoccupied land in excess of 160 acres could be confiscated and sold to “men of small means who will make a home,” and have access to federal irrigation. Finally, he asserted that construction on the project might stop until speculators and other large-scale landholders are convinced to divest themselves of excess holdings and live upon and cultivate the lands they retain. The President of the EBWUA, a local banker named

31 Reclamation Service to the Shareholders, Box 16: Folder 262-D13 Exhibits to Accompany Hearing Board Review -Rio Grande Project, Entry 4, RG 115, NARA-DEN.
Lafayette Clapp, responded by stating that they were trying to get farmers to buy land, but that, frankly, if farmers will not purchase the land, then speculators will.  

Speculators and farmers were rhetorically represented as incompatible extremes in the eyes of federal advocates. Fisher countered the image of the speculator as a detriment to the community with that of an idealized farmer. He noted that the successful Mesilla Valley farmer was living on a small, diversified, farm served by irrigation. Echoing Benjamin Hill’s speech almost a decade before, he states that these modest farmers were “an asset to the community and [were] aiding in its upbringing.” The secretary, however, did not specifically define this farmer as Hispanic, or non-Hispanic. A few months later, A.P. Davis, claimed that the ownership of large areas undermined one’s character, inviting slothfulness, inefficiency, and failure. Small farms, on the other hand, he argued, contribute to the “prosperity of the individual and the community as a whole.”

Local elites and community leaders, including Nathan Boyd, who had been involved in speculative water development schemes since the 1890s, echoed the Reclamation


Service’s idealistic arguments. Boyd asserts in a letter to the Reclamation Service that speculators are of the opinion that local prosperity is contingent on “men of large capital” using their ample resources to quickly bring land under cultivation in situations in which poor men are unable to meet their financial obligations. Ironically, Boyd, who had courted British investment for his irrigation and development plans in the 1890s and who had invested in the Santo Tòmas land grant, did not see the large landholder as a benefit to the community. He, instead, insists that the poor home seeker should be “helped to prosper,” because their success serves the community much more than that of the speculator or large landholder.34 Land, he wrote, needed to be provided to farm families at reasonable prices.

Lafayette Clapp, who was also the director of the Elephant Butte Water Users Association, was another local voice expressing concern about speculation. He wrote, in 1915, that the project was becoming a betrayal of the reformist intentions of the Reclamation Act which was intended to “pave the way for industrious but poor [farmers] to successfully provide homes for themselves and families on the land.” Instead, reclamation was allowing men of means to become more wealthy by purchasing large tracts of undeveloped land, subdividing it and selling lots at “fancy prices” after the government spent millions of dollars to make the land productive. This was likely a criticism of the Bracito land company. The “fancy prices”, however, were a reflection of a robust real estate market throughout the Mesilla Valley, not just speculative holdings. The Bracito lands, after all, were not held in anticipation of future high prices. They were being sold and leased to settlers beginning in 1905, before Reclamation Service water reached the land.

34 Nathan Boyd to Judge King, July 20, 1916.
Nonetheless, Clapp lamented that speculation was undermining the potential of the Mesilla Valley. He wrote that reclamation should serve both farmers and the national interest by providing opportunities to indigent farmers and boosting the economy by bringing millions of acres or land under cultivation, providing millions of homes, and putting millions of dollars into the national economy.  

While reclamation engineers and local leaders fretted about speculation, they facilitated the market that speculators depended upon. Indeed, the project promised to bring dependable water to a region long considered one of New Mexico’s agricultural jewels. Real estate values were guaranteed to increase dramatically. Moreover, residents throughout the region were cognizant of this fact and ready to take advantage of the prosperity that reclamation promised. Indeed, the most direct contribution the Reclamation Service made to shifting land tenure and increased real estate value was the simple fact that by addressing the water famine and the international conflict it triggered through the application of modern science, the federal government encouraged increased confidence in the future productivity of the Mesilla Valley. Many reclamation engineers felt that the reclaimed lands were, quite literally, destined to be put to use by settlers searching for new opportunity, or escape from difficult circumstances.

The Reclamation Service fought speculation through policy, which was implemented by the Service and the Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association, and litigation. The Reclamation Service’s most effective regulatory weapon was the condition they imposed

35 “The Elephant Butte Project,” Pgs. 2, 5-6, 7, 8
upon the Mesilla Valley that limited the amount of land individuals could subscribe to the Rio Grande Project (and all other Reclamation Service Projects) to 160 acres. A.P. Davis and other officials argued that, in fact, the limitation should be even lower in the Mesilla Valley. The policy was undermined by the water users association’s own instructions to farmers in which they provided ways around the stipulation. If one wanted to farm the land, they could “distribute” excess 160-acre plots to other family members, who then could subscribe the land to the project. If they were interested in taking advantage of the real estate market, they could subscribe their 160-acre plot and deed the rest to the EBWUA, which would hold the land for up to five years before it had to be sold, allowing the landowner to take advantage of increased real estate values. The Reclamation Service therefore was weakened by local initiative. Most land, nonetheless, was subdivided and sold in the first decade of the Rio Grande Project. The most significant exception to this trend was the Mesilla Valley Real Estate Company/Santo Tòmas Farms Company who held over 3,000 acres of undeveloped land from 1905 until 1925.

The Rio Grande Project, speculation, marketing and land exchanges resulted not only in shifting land tenure and angst over speculation, but also fostered increased diversity in the Mesilla Valley. Many of the people who were coming to buy farms and settle in the Mesilla Valley after 1905 were not like the Hispanic founders who established frontier settlements in the region in the 1840s. Neither were they the idealized heroic farmers that Reclamation Service officials and local advocates lauded or the speculative villains that they castigated.
To be sure, many Non-Hispanic Americans from the Midwest and, eventually, the South established farms in the Mesilla Valley, but reclamation brought a variety of new ethnic groups new groups to the valley. The most noticeable new ethnic groups to arrive in the region in the first two decades of the Rio Grande Project were Dutch Boers, Japanese and Japanese American settlers, and Black Americans from the Southern United States. These groups diversified the ethnic and racial character of the Mesilla Valley while incorporating themselves into the interethnic traditions of the valley to varying degrees.

One of the first new ethnic groups to gain a foothold in the region were Dutch Boers from South Africa who had been defeated by the British in the Boer War (1899-1901). Defeat provided Boers with the unenviable choice of staying in Africa under British rule or seeking refuge and new lives elsewhere. Boers settled in other African countries, the United States, Argentina, and Mexico.

General Ben Viljoen, a Boer military leader and parliamentarian, initially felt his future lay in Mexico. In 1903 He approached the Mexican government and President Profirio Diaz with a plan to establish a Boer colony in Chihuahua, Mexico. Some Boers did informally settle in Mexico, but the Mexican government’s inaction in officially approving a settlement frustrated Viljoen and he traveled to El Paso Texas in 1905 in search of a new home. Following the path Hispanic settlers had long traveled, Viljoen and a few families traveled up the Rio Grande from El Paso until the arrived at La Mesa, in the heart of the Mesilla Valley. He knew about the approval of the Rio Grande project and was confident
that the already fertile lands would become more productive. The Boers, after all, had been farmers in Africa.

Viljoen, planning to raise vegetables, purchased two tracts of land outside La Mesa in 1906. Other Boers, many of whom were less affluent than the General, followed his example and settled throughout the Mesilla Valley. Most farmed less than 40 acres. Chamberino and La Mesa were centers of Boer settlement (with other colonies near Fabens, Texas and Chihuahua, Mexico). At least twenty Boer families were living in the vicinity of the Viljoen farm by 1909.

Ben Viljoen and his fellow colonists maintained a strong cultural identity, which eventually even included frequent trips back to South Africa. This cultural preservation, however, was not exclusive. The Boers were not insular. They quickly integrated themselves into the Hispanic community and even had their dead buried at the local Catholic cemetery until a Protestant church was established in Berino, another historically Hispanic center settlement across the Rio Grande from Chamberino. The Berino church became the center of Boer religious activity and ritual, but connection with the established Hispanic population remained strong. Viljoen, for example, worked with his neighbors, regardless of ethnicity or race, to ensure they preserved their water rights as more settlers came into the Mesilla Valley. He also fought to counter the increasing racial tension that


accompanied the arrival of more Non-Hispanic settlers, especially from the Southern United States, in the Mesilla Valley. 38

Viljoen, like some of his Non-Hispanic neighbors, developed strong connections with Mexico, especially during the Mexican Revolution. He was a stalwart supporter of the Constitutionalist faction headed by Francisco I. Madero, Venustiano Carranza, and Alvaro Obregón. The General’s service to Mexico, however, was not passive. After Madero won the first phase of fighting and became President of Mexico he recruited Viljoen to go to Baja California to battle insurgent anarchists, known as the Magonistas. Later, Viljoen served as the Mexican government’s representative in negotiations with the Yaqui Indians of Sonora, a group mightily persecuted by Mexican dictator Porfirio Diaz prior to the Mexican Revolution. Other Boers served in various Mexican Revolutionary armies. Like Thomas Fountain, the Boers were actively participating in the revolutionary turmoil that swept Mexico for nearly a decade beginning in 1911. 39 These were not steps they needed to take. They, rather, reflect a confraternity with Mexicans and Mexico. 40 At the same time, Ben Viljoen also embraced his American identity. He became a U.S. citizen in 1909 and encouraged other Boers to adopt United States citizenship. He and his wife both served stints as Post Master in the Mesilla Valley before 1910. Viljoen was also a proponent in the

38 Du Toit, Boer Settlers, Pgs. 56, 60, 66

39 “El Revolucion en Mexico,” Labrador, May 12, 1911, Pg. 2; [No Title], Eco del Valle, May 18, 1911, Pg. 3; “Trouble in Store for Insurrectos on West Coast of Mexico,” Albuquerque Journal, June 3, 1911, Pg. 1; “Mesa Revuelta,” Eco del Valle, September 16, 1911, Pg. 3.

40 Du Toit, Boer Settlers, Pgs. 64-5.
The Boer connections with the community also included associational organizations advocating for farmers. They were members of the Elephant Butte Water User’s Association, formed The Alfalfa Association in 1908 to negotiate alfalfa prices, and in 1909 established the Mesilla Valley farmers Union, which advocated for the interests of farmers, including the development of roads and infrastructure to make it easier to get produce and other agricultural products to market. Viljoen was a supporter of the Reclamation Service and an active advocate for progressive farming and implored his fellow residents, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, to develop valley lands and support the “progressive systematic and economic prosecution of agricultural . . . advancement,” of local farms.  

The Boer enclaves in the Mesilla Valley did not last long as self-contained communities. Generation shifts occurred among the Boers, just as they did among Hispanics. Boer children born in the Mesilla Valley turned away from farming as a livelihood and drifted away from their parents homesteads by the 1920s. Most followed one of two migration patterns. Some relocated to regional urban centers like Las Cruces and El Paso. Others went farther and settled in California. Efforts by elders to get the young


42 “Scientific Irrigation and Its Importance to Home Builders General Viljoen Writes Article for Trophy Boer,” Albuquerque Journal May 15, 1908, Pg. 2; “General Viljoen Named President of Alfalfa Grower's Association,” Albuquerque Journal, November 7, 1910, Pg. 4. Du Toit, Boer Settlers, Pg. 50;
to return to the farms were generally unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{43} The Boer land usually fell into the hands of new settlers, likely Non-Hispanic, who arrived in the region in the 1920s and 1930s.

A black southerner named Francis Boyer led another group of settlers. They established themselves on lands held by the Bracito Company in the 1920s. Boyer had heard stories of the Mesilla Valley from his father Henry who, as a free black teamster, traveled through the region during the Mexican American War. Henry Boyer eventually returned to Georgia, the place of his birth. His son, Francis, was born in 1871 and grew up amidst the growing terror of the Jim Crow south. He attended and graduated from Morehouse College in Atlanta and worked as a copyeditor for the Atlanta Constitution newspaper and was a school teacher. An accomplished debater, Boyer met his wife Ella Louise Macgruder, a graduate of Spellman college at a teacher’s debate seminar. They were married in 1894.\textsuperscript{44}

Boyer, an activist, spoke out against the racial injustice that shaped life in the Jim Crow South. The Ku Klux Klan and other racist groups, in turn, threatened him. Boyer responded by attempting to establish black communities in Alabama, Georgia, and, Florida. They all ended in failure. Boyer finally lost all hope of remaining in the South and like others before him, he headed west.\textsuperscript{45} Francis Boyer and two of his former students left

\textsuperscript{43} Du Toit, \textit{Boer Settlers}, Pgs. 72-3.


\textsuperscript{45} Walton, “Vado, New Mexico,” Pgs. 18-19.
Georgia in 1896. Traveling mostly on foot and supporting themselves with odd jobs they arrived in New Mexico a two years later. Boyer filed a homestead claim on a 160-acre plot near Roswell, New Mexico in 1900 or 1901. His family joined him a year later.46

Boyer was not content to just homestead. He wanted to build a community where blacks could live and prosper independent of white racism. He advertised his settlement, Blackdom, in black newspapers. He had some success. In less than a decade the town had about 300 residents and encompassed 15,000 acres of town and farmland. The community had a church, post office, school, law office, and newspaper. Relations with nearby communities were initially friendly. For example, white neighbors attended the Emancipation Day (Juneteenth) festivities in Blackdom every year. Unfortunately, this amiability would not last. By 1920, some white residents in the nearby community of Dexter began intimidating the Black community and forcefully urged Boyer and his fellow settlers to leave. The racial tension coincided with economic strife within Balckdom. Boyer lost his land to foreclosure when his farms failed to become profitable.47

Francis Boyer left Blackdom with eight wagons of colonists and headed for the lands his father visited many years before. They arrived in Vado, New Mexico in late 1920. His father, who was still alive and traveling with the colonists, was delighted to be back in the Mesilla Valley. 48 Boyer rented about 250-acres of undeveloped land on the Bracito grant.

47 Walton, “Vado, New Mexico,” Pg. 20
48 Henry Boyer died in 1922 at the age of 102.
He eventually purchased the land in 10, 20, and 40 acre sections with whatever money he could collect. Boyer expanded his holdings to 500 acres and encouraged blacks passing through the Mesilla Valley to purchase land and settle in the area. His efforts resulted in the settlement of 40-60 black families in the valley. 49

Boyer also made arrangements for the black families of Vado to use the white Baptist church in La Mesa for services. Children from Vado were initially forced to attend classes in a substandard facility in La Union, due to racial politics that required the segregation of black students from other students. Undaunted, Boyer advocated for educational opportunities. He was active in the formation of a branch of the NAACP in Las Cruces in 1924, which fought educational inequality and racial discrimination. Boyer also continued to press the local school district for a modern facility that served black students. He was successful in 1926 when the Paul Lawrence Dunbar School, a four room school that served elementary through high school students was constructed in Vado. A small private black college was also established near the black community in Vado. Known colloquially as the Reverend Hughes School, it was established in 1925, but only lasted four years. Religious institutions grew alongside the educational facilities in Vado. By 1930, the town had two Baptist churches and a Catholic Mission. 50  

Boyer’s dreams of building a black community in the West may have never lived up to his dreams. His community never prospered. The Rio Grande Project and associated land exchanges, nonetheless, allowed

49 Walton, “Vado, New Mexico,” Pg. 22.

50 Walton, “Vado, New Mexico,” Pg. 22.
Boyer to find an agricultural refuge in the West. Vado still exists and descendants of Boyer and other founding settlers still live in the Mesilla Valley.

A third new ethnic group arrived in the valley in numbers to garner attention after the approval of the Rio Grande Project. Japanese and Japanese-American farmers began settling the valley. They did not congregate in enclaves like the Boers, or develop separate communities like Boyer did in Vado, instead they dispersed throughout the valley. The accretion of Japanese residents is reflected by the fact that the 1900 census does no list any people with Japanese heritage living in Dona Ana County. Ten years later there were only two Japanese families in Dona Ana County, but several residents born in Japan had settled in the El Paso area. Twenty–seven settlers born in Japan, many with children born in the United States, were living throughout the Mesilla Valley by 1920. According to Toshi Nakayama, who was born in Chamberino, there were 64 Japanese families living in the Mesilla Valley in 1930. 51

While the Rio Grande Project and the availability of potentially rich farmland played a role in attracting Japanese farmers, other factors contributed, including kin and friendship networks. Toshi Nakayama’s father, Ruihei Yabumoto, was enticed to visit the Mesilla Valley by family who had settled in the Anthony area. He liked what he saw and brought his family to El Paso from Los Angeles in 1915. Yabumoto leased a farm near

Anthony before eventually purchasing twenty-five acres and settling in Chamberino. The property was probably an old Hispanic farm. It had an “old, old adobe house.” Toshi Nakayama, who was born in the house in 1920, noted that it was in disrepair, but that everybody’s houses were “like that.” 52 The home had no heat, indoor plumbing, or electricity.

Yabumoto chose Chamberino partly because other families of Japanese heritage had already settled in the area, but he did not ethnically isolate himself. 53 The Yabumotos were well integrated into the interethnic community at Chamberino. The family relied on Hispanic neighbors to learn irrigated farming. These selfsame neighbors taught Mrs. Yamabuto how to prepare corn tortillas, beans, tamales, and chile. Toshi’s parents only spoke Japanese when they arrived in the Mesilla Valley. The learned Spanish before they ever spoke English. Toshi’s mother, in fact, never learned English. She relied on Spanish, and her children’s proficiency with English to communicate with her few neighbors who did not speak Spanish. Hispanics who lived in the town of Chamberino provided farm labor for the Yamabutos, especially after Toshi’s father died in 1929. Toshi’s mother and Chloe Dondaldson, also a widow, both ran farms with the assistance of local Hispanic labor, often employing entire families. 54 The use of local labor became especially prevalent with the

52 Toshi Nakayama, Interview by Jane O’Cain, March 14, 1997 & March 27, 1997, Interview # 210, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library

53 Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.

54 Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project; The Donaldson family purchased a farm in the Mesilla Valley in 1910. Chloe Donaldson’s son, Sam, became an
increased cultivation of cotton in the late 1920s. While the hired pickers did most of the work, the Yabamutos and Donaldsons worked in the fields alongside the laborers. The Yamabutos also provided financial assistance to local Hispanic families and, like Japanese families throughout the Mesilla Valley, took part in community events and celebrations. Japanese farmers including Joe Ohmura, Yaichi Kawasaki, Teneizaro Hashimoto, and Hichiro Migamoto (or Matisaba) donated between five and seven thousand cantaloupe to the farm bureau for a celebration known as Farm Bureau Day in 1917. Hichiro Migamoto was married to a Hispanic woman.

Toshi Nakayama noted in an oral history that she rarely visited with other Japanese families in the valley. This is not to say the Japanese eschewed their culture. There was an unsuccessful effort to establish a Japanese language school in the Mesilla Valley. Toshi’s parents also encouraged their children to marry into other Japanese families. Her mother pined for the food of her homeland and she regularly ordered rice, soy sauce, and other staples from California. The Yamuboto’s did not commemorate birthdays and anniversaries, but they did celebrate New Years. Toshi’s mother made sushi rolls for the occasion. They included ingredients ordered from Los Angeles, including Japanese rice, Shitake and Masutaki Mushrooms, pickled ginger, dried fish, and Japanese beans. Some

________________________

internationally-known correspondent for ABC news. He currently owns a ranch in Lincoln County New Mexico. Chloe’s husband, Samuel, died before Sam was born.

55 Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project; “Japanese Donate Cantaloupe,” Organized Farming, September 1917, Pg. 2; Box 13: Folder 6: EBID Subject File 1906-1925, Misc Subjects and Correspondence, Organized Farming File (5.42), Records of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.
Japanese families celebrated Emperor’s Day in the 1920s. The annual Japanese holiday was marked with big community picnic near the university on April 29. 56

The arrival of Japanese immigrants was not without racial tension. El Paso newspapers and the Bureau of Investigation noted the arrival of Japanese in the El Paso area southeast of the Mesilla Valley with concern. They expressed fears of a “Japanese Invasion” from California. 57 The state of New Mexico, in 1921, passed legislation proposing an amendment to the state constitution barring Japanese (and other groups ineligible for citizenship) from purchasing land in the state. Voters subsequently approved the amendment. 58 Some Mesilla Valley migrants circumvented the law by purchasing land in the names of their American born children. John Nakayama, an immigrant from Japan, purchased a farm about twenty miles north of the Yabumotos in the name of his son, Carl. Carl eventually married Toshi Yamuboto. Another son, Roy Nakayama, attended New Mexico State University and became a leading horticulturalist in the post World War II era. He continued Fabián García’s Chile research and played a pivotal role in the development of chile varieties that enabled the development the modern chile industry in southern New Mexico. The Nakayama Scale, moreover, was the standard for categorizing chile heat for decades until it was supplanted in popularity by the Scoville Scale.

56 Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.


The arrival of new settlers in and around the farming villages of the Mesilla Valley also provided opportunities to established residents. Longina Benavides, for example, began selling enchiladas to local farmers around La Mesa in 1915. Like similar establishments that had existed in the regional centers of Las Cruces and Mesilla since the 1880s, her humble operation attracted an interethnic clientele. Eventually Benavides’s informal system in which she lit a lantern outside her home to announce that she had food available evolved into a restaurant and bar, called Chope’s. She ran the establishment out of her home until her death on December 24, 1940. Benavides spent her life sustaining her neighbors. She served food and alcohol to a broad group that included Hispanics, Boers, Russian Jews, Japanese, Scottish and English Immigrants, and Non-Hispanic American residents who lived in and near La Mesa. Longina also contributed to her family’s prosperity. Her husband, Margarito, began his married life as a farm laborer living with his in-laws. Ten years later, he owned his own farm and by 1930 he was a cotton farmer interacting with larger regional markets.59

When Longina Benavides died she left the café, based out of her century old home, to her twenty-four year old son, José “Chope” Benavides and his wife. Jose was working as a truck driver for the W.P.A. when he inherited the restaurant. He and his wife continued to serve local residents food that was based on traditional ingredients such as corn, chile (red

59 “United States Census, 1910,” La Mesa, Dona Ana, New Mexico; sheet 1A, NARA microfilm publication T624; “United States Census, 1920,” Dona Ana, New Mexico; sheet 11B, NARA microfilm publication T625, Roll 1075; “United States Census, 1930,” La Mesa, Dona Ana, New Mexico; enumeration district (ED) 0013, sheet 13B, NARA microfilm publication T626, roll 1394.
and green) and beans. The restaurant, which was always a community based institution found fame in the Mesilla Valley, long before the popularity of Mexican food became a cultural commodity in the late 1920s. Chope’s is still in business under the management of the Benavides family. The cars and trucks of locals, travelers, and tourists regularly overflow the eatery’s small parking lot. Chope’s is an attraction that began organically as a service to a community that was growing and diversifying as a result of the Rio Grande Project.

Chope’s symbolically reflects the manner in which interaction and new settlement served to provide new opportunity, but that was not always the case. New settlement was also a threat to local communities and tradition. The establishment of La Alianza Hispano America in the Mesilla Valley was at least partly the result of the economic and social pressures that the influx of new settlers represented for Hispanic residents of the Mesilla Valley. The organization of the chapter in Las Cruces coincides directly with the first wave of reclamation related immigration to the region. Branches were established in the southern Mesilla Valley in the late 1920s. Community leaders such as A.J. Fountain, Fabían García, and D.M. Rodriguez and used La Alianza Hispano America as a tool to protect the interests of the Hispanic population. These same men were also deeply integrated into the reclamation advocacy that the Rio Grande Project represented. They were living in two worlds: one that venerated ethnic identity and one that embraced modern change.

60 "United States Census, 1940," Election Precinct 8 La Mesa, Dona Ana, New Mexico, United States; enumeration district (ED) 7-16, sheet 15A, NARA digital publication T627, Roll 2443; Julie M. Hughes, “Chope’s Family is Connected to New Mexico State University,” Panorama Volume 55, Number 2 (Summer 2006), n.p.
In this environment the Reclamation Service was forced to accede to local conditions. As with nearly every aspect of the project, local circumstances and Reclamation Service policy interacted to transform the Mesilla Valley. Indeed, the ways in which the Rio Grande Project influenced land tenure and demographics reflects the ambivalence inherent in implementing reclamation in the Mesilla Valley. The reclamation project meant many things to many people. Established residents both resisted and embraced the changes reclamation brought. Initially, local residents saw it as an opportunity to sell and buy land that was certainly going to increase in value. These benefits became less attainable as the costs of the project mounted. Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents confronted financial difficulty with different strategies, but they faced the same reality. Farming was becoming more expensive. Speculation and settlement were pressing concerns among reclamation officials. They held to an agrarian fantasy in which small farms industriously cultivated by white non-Hispanic family farmers would make the Mesilla Valley virtuous. In an effort to make their vision a reality they strenuously resisted any speculative tendencies they saw in the valley and encouraged the active advertisement and sale of lands, ideally to their preferred demographic. Advertising and speculation also attracted other settlers, such as Boers, blacks, and Japanese. In essence, the effort to settle the Mesilla Valley with non-Hispanic farmers had unintended effects that resulted in increased diversity in which ethnic and racial lines were relatively fluid. It was not the presence of federal irrigation water flowing through Mesilla Valley ditches that triggered change in the valley. The mere expectation that a dependable water supply was coming resulted in transformations before the water ever arrived.
Chapter 6: Ditches and Devastation: Water: 1905-1930

The development of modern federally based irrigation in the Mesilla Valley facilitated changes in land tenure and demographics. These transformations were, however, indirect compared to the Reclamation Service engineers more fundamental concern; the control and management of water. The project was, at its core, designed to rationalize the flow of the Rio Grande and provide water to industrious settlers and residents. While the construction of the Engle Dam and the impoundment of water in the Elephant Butte Reservoir were the symbolic center of the Rio Grande Project, they were merely a piece in a much more elaborate collection of ditches and canals that provided irrigation to farms. Reclamation Service representatives interacted with local residents at the ditch level and, by the 1920s, controlled the community ditches (*acequias madres*) and the water the flowed through them. In the process, the federal engineers facilitated major changes in the local water democracies. They did not, however, completely displace local tradition or patterns of community interaction.

Federal control of water in the Mesilla Valley required two things. First, the Reclamation Service had to acquire water rights, both in the valley and on the Rio Grande. This was achieved through a combination of legislation and negotiation with local water users. Second, the Reclamation Service officials quickly realized that they needed to control the community ditches. This was a difficult proposition. After all, the engineers were not bringing irrigation to the Mesilla Valley. If anything, the Service was imposing itself into local and regional tradition and integrating established community practices into their own management regime. Local jurisdiction was preserved in varying degrees for over a decade.
after the approval of the Rio Grande Project, but residents ultimately had no choice but to lose much of the control they had over their ditches.

Acequias were fundamental to the social, economic, and political life in the Mesilla Valley. The Mexican Grants establishing such towns as Doña Ana, Las Cruces, and Mesilla in the 1840s and 1850s, specified that the acequia madre be constructed before settlement was approved. Ditches even predated the establishment of municipal offices and religious institutions. The grants also provided for the administration of the acequias. For example, the Doña Ana Grant specified that the Governor would not distribute land to settlers until the acequia madre was completed.

The community ditches defined the Mesilla Valley when the Rio Grande Project was approved. There were eleven community acequias (acequias madres) in the valley in 1905. Four of the acequias were on the east side of the Rio Grande. These were the Dona Ana, Mesilla, Las Cruces, and Berino Acequias. The ditches on the west side of the river were the Picacho, San Miguel, Santo Tómas, La Mesa, Chamberino, Three Saints, and La Union Acequias. The east side ditches accounted for two-thirds of the approximately 130 miles of community acequias in the Mesilla Valley.¹ Several smaller community ditches were also in use. As time went by, the irrigation ditches came to be described interchangeably as ditches, canals, acequias, and laterals, but their local role remained unchanged.

The management of *acequias* followed a predictable routine for nearly four decades after the initial settlement of Doña Ana. *Mayordomos*, elected by their fellow community members, enforced the allocation and conservation of water, acted as mediators in times of conflict, and organized and directed the maintenance of the ditches. All water users had a stake in the *acequias* because they were expected to assist in the development, maintenance and repair of the canals and other irrigation structures through their labor or, if they had the means, by hiring workers to perform the task. The amount of work required of each person, known as a *fatiga*, was determined in relation to the amount of land he had fronting the *acequia madre*. Larger land owners used more water and were, therefore, expected to contribute more work.

The importance of the *acequias* was codified in legislation. The New Mexico Territorial legislature passed several laws affecting the traditional, community based system of *acequia* management. Regulations recognizing traditional *acequia* governance were passed in the first two sessions of the New Mexico Territorial legislature in 1851 and 1852. These Acts, for the first time under United States jurisdiction, placed the customary management of the ditches into a legal construct and ensured that *acequia* control be vested in the community. The acts provided for the protection of existing *acequias*, the right of citizens to construct *acequias de cumun* (communal ditches) and codified the responsibilities of water-users in the management of the ditches. Legislators also used the acts to specify the roles of the *mayordomos* and provided penalties for water-users who did not commit their fair share of work to the maintenance of the *acequias*. Each water user along the *acequia* was entitled to take water from the ditch, as specified by the *mayordomo*.
The Acts promulgated the procedures under which land could be taken for the construction of an *acequia*.²

Laws passed in the 1880s and 1895 served to expand the power of *acequia* governance, at the cost of *mayordomo* autonomy. These laws required that three member commissions who were elected by the community *govern* *acequías madres* in the common interest. The commissioners had broad administrative and corporate powers. The role of the *mayordomo* was retained, but his power was restrained. No longer independent, he followed and implemented the policy of the commission. While the commissions in the Mesilla Valley were often interethnic in composition in the early years, by the time the Rio Grande Project was approved, they were almost entirely of Non-Hispanic composition. *Mayordomos* were overwhelmingly still Hispanic.

Concerns over the erosion of traditional *acequia* governance at the hands of ditch commissions came to a head in 1903. Domingo A. Ortega, a territorial representative from Socorro County, introduced House Bill 26 on January 27, 1903, which aimed to restore the autonomy and administrative power that *mayordomos* had lost in the previous two decades. Another representative, Albert Fall, introduced competing legislation that pursued the opposite goal.³ His bill bolstered the powers of the commissions at the


³ Fall, a resident of Las Cruces since the 1880s had built his early political career attempting to build racial divides between residents in the Mesilla Valley. He was a major adversary of Albert Fountain. Fall’s political fortune carried him all the way to a position as
expense of the *mayordomos*. The two bills were debated concurrently. Petitions arrived from throughout the state voicing support for one bill or the other. Support for the Fall bill was much more widespread. This may have been a reflection of the increasing influence of reform minded residents who saw the commission system, a corporate structure, more modern than traditional *mayordomo*-centered water management. It may have also been the result of Albert Fall’s considerable political influence. Both bills passed, but Ortega’s bill, approved three days before Fall’s, was eviscerated. A condition of its passage was a provision that counties could opt out of the law by petition. Ultimately twenty counties, including Dona Ana, were exempted from the law. The Ortega bill was only implemented in two counties, Bernalillo and Socorro. Falls’ bill, on the other hand, was applicable all other New Mexico Counties.4

The Fall bill expanded the roles of ditch commissioners in several ways. It allowed the commissioners to enter binding contracts, and develop policy, bylaws, and regulations, including assessments (fees) and *mayordomo* pay. The legislation also prevented water users who were delinquent in payments from getting water. In the past, the *mayordomo* had discretion in this matter. Fall’s legislation, required the *mayordomo* to prosecute any water user in violation of *acequia* regulations. A failure to do so could result in a fine or incarceration for the *mayordomo*.5 The Rio Grande Project was, therefore, approved in an

Secretary of the Interior. It was a position from which he ignobly fell as he became embroiled in the Teapot Dome Scandal.


environment in which territorial legislation was already undermining the traditional role of the *mayordomo*.

The Rio Grande Project brought a new level of water governance to the Mesilla Valley that tapped into the organizational structure of the established water democracies. Section 6 of the Reclamation Act required that water users organize themselves into a water users association.\(^6\) Mesilla Valley water users wasted no time in establishing the Elephant Butte Water Users Association (EBWUA). The EBWUA was organized as a non-profit entity specifically to finance the Rio Grande Project by securing repayment guarantees from local farmers as per the stipulations of the Reclamation Act, which required that local water users repay the costs incurred by the Federal Government in constructing the components of the project. Mesilla Valley farmers pledged to pay 40 dollars per acre to be paid out over ten years for the right to use reclamation water.\(^7\)

In essence, the water users association was envisioned as a local intermediary between the Reclamation Service and the farmers. Support for the establishment of the association was nearly unanimous among local farmers. Support was partly due to the fact that the Rio Grande Project promised to rejuvenate farming in the withering valley. Significantly, the EBWUA was also organized as a broadly governed body that tapped into


the democratic community traditions that had historically shaped *acequia* management in the Mesilla Valley. The association was governed by a thirty member council and a ten member board of directors. The council consisted of three members from each of ten districts and the board of directors was composed of one member per district. Districts mirrored the already established boundaries of the community *acequia* commissions. Council members and the board of directors were elected in community elections.  

The 1905 EBWUA council was composed of an interethnic mix of residents, some of whom had served on ditch commissions. About twenty percent of the council members were Hispanic. Almost all council members were long-time Mesilla Valley residents and community leaders, including A. J. Fountain, Jr., O. C. Snow, Guadalupe Ascarate, and Theodore Rounalt. The Officers and Board of Directors, however, were all non-Hispanic, though still mostly established community members.

The Board of Directors met at least once a month and were in charge of the day-today management of the EBWUA. The council met less regularly, but annually nominated a Vice-President, President, Secretary, and Treasurer from among their ranks. These officers formed the executive leadership of the organization. The council also had the authority to make and adopt policy, which was implemented by the board of directors. Local water users and the EBWUA were not, however, able to operate in complete autonomy. All water


9 Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association, “Information and Instructions.”
users’ association policy required the approval of the Reclamation Service.¹⁰ This allowed the reclamation engineers and their legal advisors to influence local water management policy.

In many ways the EBWUA officers and council reflected a cross section of the farmers in the Mesilla Valley. Two thirds of the members were cultivating less than 160 acres in 1913. Most were exclusively farmers, but about one third split their time between farming and other businesses or occupations. Established residents with experience as ditch commissioners and mayrodemos were well represented among the councilmen. About half the council members rented some of their land, usually small parcels, to other farmers, a practice that began in the 1880s as a strategy to confront the water famine. One way the council did not reflect the demographics of Mesilla Valley was the fact that there was only one Hispanic farmer, Antonio Silva y Abeyta, among the council members in 1913, even though the majority of water users were Hispanic.¹¹ This anomaly was more pronounced among the Board of Directors and officers who were all non-Hispanic in 1913. Certainly a manifestation of decreased Hispanic influence in water politics, the composition of the EBWA leadership more appropriately reflected the fact the Board of Directors and officers were expected to interact regularly with larger legal and bureaucratic entities outside the community, such as the Reclamation Service and state engineers office, which

¹⁰ Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association, “Information and Instructions.”

were dominated by non-Hispanic leadership. There was a long tradition of non-Hispanics occupying positions that required interaction with non-community entities.

It is important to note that the EBWUA was an administrative association that did not replace the ditch commissions or the mayordomos. Water users continued to exclusively elect Hispanic community members to fill the important mayordomo position in the first years of the Rio Grande project. Lino Sisneros, for example, was elected mayordomo of the Las Cruces acequia in 1906. Las Cruces was the most “Americanized” community in the valley, but they still chose a Hispanic mayordomo.\(^\text{12}\)

Sisneros, born in 1860, was not a local elite. He was the son of a farmer who owned 150 acres in 1870. His father, Anastacio, may have been a victim of the drought. By 1900, Anastacio was a laborer living in Las Cruces. He still had a small farm, but it was not his primary means of support. Lino began his adult life as a laborer, but gained skill as a stonemason and eventually became a self-employed contractor sometime between 1900 and 1910. Sisneros also cultivated his father’s land for nearly twenty years, after his death, but he was not primarily a farmer when he was elected mayordomo. By the twentieth century, the mayordomo was a political position in which popularity across ethnic lines was pivotal. Lino Sisneros was a good fit in 1906. He grew up on a farm, spoke English and Spanish, had worked as a laborer, and at the time he was elected, was improving his social status as a self-employed skilled worker.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) “Noticias Locales,” Labrador, January 12, 1906: Pg. 3.

\(^{13}\) United States Census Bureau, “1870: Dona Ana County, New Mexico,” sheet 193A, NARA microfilm publication T593; Roll 893; United States Census Bureau, “1910: Dona...
The ditch commission and *mayordomo* elections two years later reflect considerable continuity in the face of shifting land tenure. All the *mayordomos* were Hispanic, but there was a slight change. They came from a more elite social class than Sisneros and were more politically connected. Andres Martinez, the San Miguel *mayordomo*, was described in local newspapers as a prominent member of the community. His public service included time as a county school board member. Nicanor Guerra, the Mesilla *mayordomo*, was also a school board member. He was, in addition, a business partner with Albert Fountain, Jr. and was investing in land in the Mesilla Valley in 1907. Guerra’s other community and political activities included a previous stint as *mayordomo* and ditch commissioner, service as a member of the grand jury of the third district federal court and he was active in local Republican party politics. Manuel Lopez, who replaced Sisneros as Las Cruces *mayordomo* in 1908, was also a local justice of the peace, a position he had held since at least 1889. None of these men were considered laborers at any time in their lives, but all, like Sisneros, were involved in agriculture in some manner. While the social class from which the *mayordomos* came was narrowing to exclude non-elites, the duties and roles of the

Ana, New Mexico,” sheet 3A, enumeration district 64, NARA microfilm publication T624; Roll 914; United States Census Bureau, “1900: Dona Ana County, New Mexico,” sheet 18A, enumeration district 42, NARA microfilm publication T623; Roll 1000.

14 “Noticias Locales”, Labrador, December 8, 1907, Pg. 3; “Noticias Locales”, Labrador, August 5, 1904, Pg. 3; “Los Jueces de Paz, Tiempo, April 20, 1901, Pg. 3; “Court Notes,” Dona Ana County Republican, October 6, 1900, Pg. 4; “Republican Convention,” Dona Ana County Republican, October 27, 1900, Pg. 1; [No title] Labrador, March 8, 1901 Pg. 3; “Primarias Republicanas,” March 1, 1912 Pg. 2; Noticias Locales”, Labrador, December 13, 1901, Pg. 3; “La Convencion Republicana de Estado Estuva Muy Concurrida,” Estrella, September 11, 1920, Pg. 1. “Noticias Locales”, Labrador, January 12, 1906, Pg. 3; “Noticias Locales”, Labrador, December 10, 1909, Pg. 2; ; “The News Directory,” Las Cruces Daily News, April 2, 1889; Pg. 3; “Married in Cruces,” El Paso Herald, April 19, 1911, Pg. 4. Lopez was still a justice in 1911.
*mayordomo* were virtually unchanged from the period before the approval of the Rio Grande Project.

The ditch commissions continued to be composed of an interethnic mix of longtime residents in the early years of the Rio Grande Project. For example, the San Miguel ditch commission included Anastacio Gonzales and Fred Appelozier in 1906, both from well established Mesilla Valley families. Two years later M.H. Peterson, Catarino Armijo, and James Queensberry were elected commissioners. The Armijo and Queensbury families had been in the valley for decades. All the other ditch commissions elected in the Mesilla Valley in 1908 had a similar composition. Like the *mayordomos*, the commissioners continued to govern the community ditches as they had prior to 1905.

A noticeable change occurred in 1911. Hispanic surnamed individuals essentially disappeared from the ditch commissions. The interethnic makeup of the commissions was replaced by a composition that combined established Non-Hispanic residents, such as A.J. Fountain, Jr. with more recent arrivals. This was the situation for the next several years until the ditch commissions were eliminated. An initially more striking change was the fact that it became more likely that a *mayordomo* would be Non-Hispanic. For example, the newly elected *mayordomo* in Mesilla was W.H. Gilliam; the Las Cruces *mayordomo* was James Queensberry, and the Dona Ana *mayordomo* was James Barncastle in 1911. This


16 “Elecciones de Acequia,” *Labrador*, December 8, 1911, Pg. 3.
was a position had previously been held by Hispanic residents. The shifts in representation were the result of two phenomena. First, new non-Hispanic settlement in the Mesilla Valley affected local demographics. Second, the federal reclamation project required increased interaction with outside entities, such as the Reclamation Service, that were more responsive to non-Hispanic residents than their Hispanic neighbors.

The 1911 increase of Non-Hispanics as mayordomos certainly reflected changes in the Mesilla Valley, but established patterns of social interaction continued to play a role in ditch governance. Gilliam, Queensberry, and Barncastle were from long-time Mesilla Valley families who had been in the valley since the 1860s. They, therefore, were integrated into the Hispanic community. The changes in local ditch governance, moreover, became less pronounced as the decade progressed. Customary practice reasserted itself and Hispanic mayordomos became more common in the last half of the 1910s. This was likely the result of new settlers integrating themselves into the interethnic traditions of the Mesilla Valley. For example, in 1916 the Chamberino mayordomo was Jose Barrio, a local community leader who had lived in the town since 1870. Just upstream in Mesilla, Nicanor Guerra was again the mayordomo. Valentin García was his assistant. 17

Changes in ditch governance reflect changes in the communities and water politics in the Mesilla Valley. The interethnic composition of the ditch commissions and Hispanic

17 "Mesilla Ditch Ready to turn over to USRS". Organized Farming, July 1918, Box 13, Folder 6: EBID Subject File 1906-1925 Misc Subjects and Correspondence, Organized Farming File, Elephant Butte Irrigation District Subject File, Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University Library; “Nellie D. Sperry v The Chamberino Ditch Company, et. al.;” March 31, 1916, Box 797, Folder: Miscellaneous January 1, 1913 thru June 30, 1919, Entry 3, RG 115, NARA-DEN.
dominance of the *mayordomo* position had been part of local water politics since the 1880s. After 1911, there was a perceptible change that altered this system. This was the result of shifts in land holding and demographics. Indeed, land tenure fundamentally affected the election of the ditch commissioners and the *mayordomos* who were traditionally selected in annual elections. Votes were allocated along a graduated scale in relation to the amount of land one held. The largest landholders, residents with 52 acres or more, were granted six votes. A farmer with sixty acres and a farmer with 600 acres each had 6 votes. All water users, even if they had little land, were granted at least one vote. The system, therefore, did not necessarily benefit major land owners. Hispanic residents who owned the majority of land in the Mesilla Valley prior to 1905 were an important, well-represented constituency in the elections. They, along with their non-Hispanic neighbors, regularly selected Hispanic *mayordomos*. Ditch commissions were representative of community leadership and were usually made up of an interethnic combination of well-established residents.

Land tenure began shifting after 1905. Initially the results were not readily apparent. Most of the early land sales were dictated by choice and opportunity. Long-established Hispanics and non-Hispanics continued to hold enough land to maintain the interethnic nature of community water management. Nonetheless, as land changed hands, new, often non-Hispanic residents, who did not necessarily appreciate the interethnic traditions of the region, were settling in the Mesilla Valley. For several years this did not have a dramatic effect on *acequia* governance, but by 1911, new settlement had reached a threshold which, coupled with the reduction of traditional Hispanic landholding in the Mesilla Valley, resulted in a decrease in Hispanic voting power in the *acequia* elections. The new settlers were initially more interested in selecting *mayordomos* and commissioners
who were like them: non-Hispanic. This notion, however, appears to have ameliorated a bit by the late 1910s as more Hispanics, albeit still elites, were elected *mayordomo* as newcomers learned local tradition. Non-Hispanics continued to dominate ditch commissions, which were entities that interacted with outside agencies.

Non-elite Hispanics were becoming separated from the organized aspects of water management in their communities, but they still played a pivotal role in the irrigation. Reclamation engineers regularly noted that, in a practical sense, Hispanic residents managed the water in the valley. If they were not irrigating their own lands, they were the laborers or tenants watering other farmers’ land via traditional means. Hispanics also often taught new settlers how to conduct successful irrigated farming. This arrangement was still dominant a decade after the Rio Grande Project began.\(^\text{18}\) Admittedly, the situation was a poor substitute for land ownership and political power. Local Hispanics, however, were able to maintain interethnic relationships with other residents in the farming communities.

While shifts in land tenure affected the water democracies in the Mesilla Valley they did not significantly undermine the governance of the community ditches. Reclamation engineers were very cognizant that they were not creating irrigation where none had existed before. The federal irrigation development in the Mesilla Valley was initially designed to take advantage of the existing irrigation infrastructure. For example, the Leasburg diversion, the first project component completed, consisted of the replacement of a traditional weir at Leasburg, near the northern end of the Mesilla Valley. The Reclamation

Service also constructed a six-mile concrete lateral designed to bring water to the community ditches and address one of the most vexing challenges in the Mesilla Valley. Historically communities needed to continually move the mouths of the ditches where they met the river after they became blocked by silt. The lateral began providing water to three community ditches, The Doña Ana, Las Cruces, and Mesilla acequias, in 1908. No new additional laterals were completed in the Mesilla Valley until 1915, even though several communities on the west side of the Rio Grande petitioned the Reclamation Service to build an eighteen-mile lateral to convey water to their acequias.19

Indeed, almost ten years into the Rio Grande project the majority of crops in the Mesilla Valley were still irrigated by community ditches that had not been linked to federally controlled laterals. This changed in 1915 when two new federal laterals, the Westside Lateral and the Eastside Lateral were completed to, either directly or indirectly, link all the major acequias to Reclamation Service canals. Additional federal canals were constructed over the next ten years.20

Still, prior to 1918, the Reclamation Service only controlled the water flowing through the laterals. The communities and their elected ditch commissioners and


mayordomos managed the water as it flowed through the acequias. This was the case even though the EBWA and Reclamation Service held and administered water rights. The New Mexico water code specified that the ownership of water and ditches were separate. The water right resided in the individual, the ditch was held by the community. Reclamation Service Engineers became intent by 1914 on consolidation of the community ditches and federal laterals because they felt that “unified” management would make irrigation more cost effective and efficient in the Mesilla Valley.21

The Rio Grande Project was unique. Most early Reclamation Service projects were planned and constructed in a unified manner in anticipation of settlement on reclaimed land, or were applied in areas with recent settlement. The Mesilla Valley proved challenging because it required that the Reclamation Service implement the Rio Grande Project upon a region with a long history of irrigation and settlement. L.R. Fiske, a Reclamation Service engineer, understood this and wrote in 1924 that the old system of community ditches was evolutionary in its development, rather than coherently planned. Acequias were constructed by each community along paths of least resistance, expanded and extended as the need for settlement arose. The engineer concluded that the mission of the Reclamation Service in the Mesilla Valley was not to replace the old acequias but to “improve upon an established system and make it [meet] practical and local . . . conditions as they exist[ed].” 22 Even if the Reclamation Service wanted to build a completely new


network of ditches, they were hamstrung by topography and historical development. Reclamation engineers noted that the community ditches were already in the best locations, “proven by long continued trial and error.” Another factor shaping the irrigated landscape was the fact that the Rio Grande waters typically carried a heavy silt load. A new layer of soil was deposited each time water was released onto a field, which, over the years, resulted in a situation in which the topography around the ditches was raised. This made it nearly impossible for federal engineers to find suitable locations for new irrigation ditches.23

Reclamation engineers saw the community ditches and many water users as an impediment to the development of the Rio Grande Project. Officials were frustrated by what they saw as inefficiency, both in the structures and the farmers. Federal engineers and administrators did not hold the water users in high regard. Residents were described as having less initiative than the average farmer on other reclamation projects. This was a racial characterization usually coupled with a qualifier noting that the majority of the residents were “Mexicans” who only spoke Spanish. Indeed, at least sixty percent of the water users in the Mesilla Valley were Hispanic in 1916, eleven years after the Rio Grande Project was approved. Many of these water users only spoke Spanish.24 Oro McDermith, the superintendent of Irrigation on the Rio Grande Project noted that tradition and custom

23 Reclamation Service, “Project History Year – 1914,” Pg. 25.

permeated irrigation in the Mesilla Valley and he was not impressed. The ditches, he wrote, were too small to efficiently carry water and had to be continually and haphazardly cleared of debris by “Mexicans with shovels.” He also stated that structures in the acequias madres were “crude to the utmost degree.”

Water use, moreover, was not as rational as the engineers hoped. This was largely the product of local history. The water supply was unpredictable before the development of the Rio Grande Project, which resulted in an irrigation regime shaped by the availability of water, rather than any standard irrigation schedule. When water was flowing through the acequia, farmers simply opened their headgates, and let water run until the ditch was drained, their tracts were flooded, or their allotted watering time had expired.

Traditionally, water use was not specifically measured. According to a Reclamation Service observer, each farmer had a revalsario (probably actually a rebalsario) at his check, which measured water elevation. The reclamation service engineer did not describe the rebalsario and the term does not appear to have been used in other regions of New Mexico. It was probably simply a benchmark placed at the headgate to measure the elevation of water in the ditch. As water rose above the rebalsario, the water user raised this check in his gate and released water onto his tract. When water dropped below the rebalsario he lowered the check. These practices continued on the community ditches after water became more dependable with the development of the Rio Grande Project. Reclamation

engineer L.M. Lawson lamented the fact that water turned out from the government ditches into community ditches was wasted in farm laterals.  

In an effort to address their concerns over inefficiency and waste, Reclamation Service officials began efforts to acquire rights to the acequias as early as 1914. The engineers were dismayed that the community ditches were not enlarged or extended by the water users after the government laterals were constructed. Engineers felt “obliged to rebuild and extend” most of the acequias. They also wanted to control the community ditches so they could manage the amount of water applied to the tracts. Service engineers calculated that most water users were applying two to three times the amount of water needed for effective cultivation.  

Unlike the Rincon Valley to the north and El Paso to the south, local sentiment in the Mesilla Valley was against the Reclamation Service gaining control over the community

------------------------


ditches. F. W. Dent, the Service’s district counsel, frustratingly noted that “the people [in the Mesilla Valley] are pretty thoroughly wed to the antiquated community ditch system” and that it would take “considerable missionary work” to get them to divorce themselves from such a system. The Reclamation Service still had had no control of community acequias in 1917, much to their frustration.28

Anti-Reclamation sentiment was strongest in the southern portion of the Mesilla Valley, with the greatest resistance in La Union, an interethnic community that began as an informal settlement on public lands. In addition to resisting Reclamation Service efforts to gain control of their acequia, La Union residents were in a conflict with the federal government over the legality of their township. It was a battle they won with the assistance of local Hispanic leader and activist Donanciano Rodriguez. 29

The tide shifted in late 1917 when the San Miguel acequia was turned over to the Reclamation Service. It was, however, not a matter of the Reclamation Service imposing its will upon the community, but was triggered by intercommunity conflict. One ditch on the west side of the river, the La Mesa community acequia, did not historically have a direct link to the Rio Grande. It received water from the San Miguel acequia. This had been the situation since it was constructed in the 1850s. The completion of the Westside lateral maintained this arrangement. The San Miguel ditch got water from the government canal


29 See Chapter 5.
before it was conveyed to La Mesa. La Mesa residents regularly complained that the San Miguel water users were not providing enough water to their ditch. San Miguel residents, for their part, complained that the system was unworkable and they were unable to guarantee water to La Mesa.  

San Miguel residents ultimately turned to the Reclamation Service for a solution in 1917 when community water users, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, signed individual waivers authorizing their ditch commissioners to turn the San Miguel acequia over to the Reclamation Service. The waivers acted as a petition allowing the ditch to be transferred to federal management. Indeed, state law prevented the Reclamation Service from taking control of community ditches unless at least 80 percent of the water users signed waivers requesting such action. The San Miguel community ditch was the first Mesilla Valley acequia to come under Reclamation Service control. The water users, by relinquishing their ditch, were making the choice to give up control of their community acequia after operating it independently of the Reclamation Service for over ten years.

The Reclamation Service wasted little time in reconstructing the San Miguel community ditch. When they acquired the acequia, it was eight feet wide, carried about two feet of water, and had no uniform grade. Turnout boxes and checks were constructed by  


31 Commissioners of the La Mesa Ditch Company to Secretary of the Interior, January 13, 1917, Box 797, Folder: Miscellaneous January 1, 1913 thru June 30 1919, Entry 3, RG115, NARA-DEN; Secretary of the Interior to Commissioners of the La Mesa Ditch Company, January 27, 1917; Box 797, Folder: Miscellaneous January 1, 1913 thru June 30 1919, Entry 3, RG115, NARA-DEN; Reclamation Service, “Annual Project History, 1918,” Pg. 115.
individual water users to meet their immediate needs and were usually composed of brush. Work began on January 1, 1918 and included the cleaning and widening of the ditch, the construction of wood checks and turnouts, and grading. The rebuilt ditch was almost twice as wide and deep as its predecessor and was able to carry an adequate supply of water to serve both La Mesa and San Miguel. Even under the Reclamation Service, ditch construction borrowed from established community tradition. The work was done by “local men who were principally farmers.” This was very similar to the fatiga under the customary mayrodomo-centered system. There was, however, a change. Workers were considered laborers and paid wages, between $1.65 and $5.00 per day, for their time. Contracts for materials were also let to members of the community.  

The relinquishment of the San Miguel community ditch appears to have marked a shift in sentiment in the Mesilla Valley. Communities throughout the region who had steadfastly held their community ditches began turning operations over to the Reclamation Service in quick succession after the San Miguel ditch was ceded and reconstructed. The Doña Ana, Las Cruces, Mesilla, La Mesa, Chamberino, and Three Saints ditches were turned over to the Reclamation Service in 1918. Modifications like those completed for the San Miguel acequia were made to the community ditches in late 1918 and early 1919. The La Union ditch, the last major acequia still under community control was taken over by the Reclamation Service in 1920.  


33 United States Bureau of Reclamation, “Project History Rio Grande Project, Calendar Year 1926,” 1926, Box 465, Folder: Rio Grande Volume 17, 1926, Entry 10, RG
Changes in community sentiment over the control of the *acequias* was not merely a change of heart. It arose concurrently with two related events, the waterlogging of vast portions of the Mesilla Valley and the subsequent formation of a new water management entity, the Elephant Butte Irrigation District.

A water crisis erupted in the Mesilla Valley in 1916, the year the dam was completed. Fields and homes throughout the valley flooded (Figure 6). The combination of a high water table and the now dependable water supply led to the over irrigation of fields, which turned sections of the valley into marsh. The problem was dramatic enough to force the EBWUA to cancel its program promoting the Mesilla Valley to new settlers.

Waterlogging was so severe in Mesilla Park that the basements of the local school were flooded, malarial mosquitoes were present in seepage swamps, and children had to bring their own water to school because the well was inoperable. By 1918, over two thirds of the Mesilla Valley was inundated, rendering vast areas uncultivated, submerging alfalfa fields, and killing orchards.34

34 District Counsel, Reclamation Service, to Chief Counsel, Reclamation Service, May 23, 1916; President, Elephant Butte Irrigation District to District Counsel, Reclamation Service, August 23, 1918, Box 817, Folder: Rio Grande 330B-348C/330 B Irri Dist Cont with Elephant Butte Irri Dist and Elephant Butte WUA for Drainage and April 1918 - -.
Figure 6: “Seepage Lake Near La Mesa Before Drainage,” 1918. (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD)
Seepage was not unexpected. Reclamation engineers had been warned by the director of the EBWUA in 1915 that the valley lands would become waterlogged as the water supply in the Rio Grande became more dependable. A.P. Davis, the Director of the Reclamation Service, cautioned water users in the spring of 1916 that the very survival of their communities was threatened by the seepage. Two years later, at the height of the seepage debacle, he wrote that the Reclamation Service had known about potential drainage problems “for years.”

Curiously, Reclamation officials did not consider their actions a contributing factor in the flooding. Drainage work was not even contemplated in the original project plans. Engineers ignored the fact that the water table was historically fairly high in the Mesilla Valley and sections of poor draining soil existed throughout the valley, even though there was data reflecting such conditions. A 1912 soil survey conducted by J.W. Nelson and L.C. Holmes noted that many farms were underlain by clay and that low lying areas were subject to such regular seepage that alkali soils had developed where water evaporated from waterlogged areas. Two years later the Reclamation Service conducted a soil reconnaissance survey that came to similar conclusions. The scientist, A. T. Strahorn, wrote that most of the Mesilla Valley soils drained well, but that there were areas susceptible to waterlogging due to poor soil texture and high water table. Oro McDermith actually

claimed in 1915 that the soil absorbed water freely. He was optimistic that the completion of the Elephant Butte Dam would actually make the situation even better because the water would have less suspended sediment and silt. The reality was exactly the opposite. The silt served to improve water absorption by laying a thin new layer of soil down every time water was applied.

The engineer’s optimism was no match for reality. Mesilla Valley residents wasted little time in demanding the Reclamation Service construct drainage canals. The majority of water users in several communities, including Mesilla, Las Cruces, and La Union, petitioned the Reclamation Service to construct drainage canals as early as the fall of 1916. The community ditch commissioners, not the EBWUA, facilitated the petitioning. In the meantime, the EBWUA was financing dredging on their own.

A.P. Davis visited the Mesilla Valley in June 1917 in order to address the seepage problem. He visited communities throughout the valley and met with water users in local stores and schoolhouses. The largest meeting Davis attended was at Chamberino where he


and the water users from the west and southern portions of the valley had a “big basket picnic” before the meeting. Davis noted “there was great anxiety,” about the seepage and that farmers were clamoring for a solution. He told local farmers that they must finance the construction of the drainage canals, work that was not contemplated in the original reclamation contract with the EBWUA. Davis, the progressive idealist of 1902; the engineer who railed against speculation; the administrator who argued that no farmer in the Mesilla Valley needed more than forty acres was now placing the residents in a difficult situation. Drown or pay for dredging.

The drainage canal construction was contingent on the formation of an irrigation district under New Mexico state law. Reclamation Service officials forced the water users to form themselves into an irrigation district before they would provide dredges to be used in the construction of the drainage ditches. Unlike the water users association, the irrigation district would actually bind all irrigable land within the Mesilla Valley to the Rio Grande Project. This would add thousands of acres of land from owners who never subscribed to the project. Many of the unsubscribed lands were in large uncultivated tracts


39 President Elephant Butte Water Users Association to A.P. Davis, Director and Chief Engineer, Reclamation Service, January 24, 1917, Box 816, Folder: Rio Grande 330-330B/330 B Irri Dist Cont with Elephant Butte Irri Dist and Elephant Butte WUA for Drainage and other contr Work and repayment of the same to June 1917, Entry 3, RG115, NARA-DEN.
that Davis considered speculative. Under the district, all landowners would be required to pay assessments for the drainage work. Those who had not already subscribed their lands to the EBWUA also had to pay for project work already completed. Davis saw the irrigation district as the only fair way to compel residents to pay for the drainage canals. He also saw the district as the most democratic way for construction costs to be shared valley-wide. After all, under the EBWUA the unsubscribed lands did not get the advantage of federal irrigation. With drainage, all lands would benefit and according to Davis it was “very unfair” to not have all land holders pay their share of the drainage expense.40

Reclamation Service officials proposed the irrigation district at a time when there was considerable resistance mounting in the Mesilla Valley. Some residents were upset about the costs of reclamation in the valley and the fact that the federal government was going to force them to pay more for drainage. Davis lamented in 1917 that “a faction of water users led by two or three attorneys” was attempting to refuse any assessments above the forty dollars that were originally agreed to in the establishment of the EBWUA. There was fear among residents on the west side of the river in towns like San Miguel, La Mesa, and Chamberino that the water users on the east side, especially Las Cruces, were going to

refuse to pay for drainage. Essentially, the more urban “Americanized” community was less supportive of the Reclamation Service than the smaller farm communities on the west side of the river.

A petition was circulated among Mesilla Valley water users in early July 1917 to gauge support for the establishment of the irrigation district. Five hundred seventy-seven water users, including fourteen women who were heads of households, signed the petition. This represented a significant majority of Mesilla Valley water users. Regrettably there is no information on what percentage of signatories were Hispanic versus non-Hispanic, but the fact that the majority of water users in the valley, at least in numbers, were Hispanic reveals that support was interethnic. The petition, moreover, was circulated and advertised in English and Spanish. It is reasonable to conclude that an appreciable percentage of petitioners were Hispanic. 42

An election on the formation of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District (EBID) was held September 13, 1917. Nine voting precincts were established to ensure that residents

41 Chief of Construction, Reclamation Service to Director and Chief Engineer, July 2, 1917, Box 816, Folder: Rio Grande 330-330B/330 B Irri Dist Cont with Elephant Butte Irri Dist and Elephant Butte WUA for Drainage and other contr Work and repayment of the same to June 1917, Entry 3, RG115, NARA-DEN; Reclamation Service; Reclamation Service, Organization of Irrigation District, January 6, 1917.

throughout the region had an opportunity to vote for the district. Polling places were
established in stores or schools in all the communities in the Mesilla Valley. Election judges
in most communities consisted of an interethnic mix of water users. The importance of
Hispanic water users was still evident in the fact that announcement of the election to form
an Irrigation District was circulated and published in Spanish and English.43

The district passed dramatically by an eleven to one margin. Nine district directors
were also selected in the election. Seven of the directors were from the Mesilla Valley, two
represented the Rincon valley to the north. Most ran unopposed and reflected a
continuation of the directors of the EBWUA. One of the seven elected Mesilla Valley
directors was Hispanic. Doñañancio Rodríguez represented San Miguel, the first community
to turn its *acequia* over to the Reclamation Service. Rodríguez, an officer with the Las
Cruces branch of the *Alianza Hispano-Americana*, probate judge, and a director of the Doña
Ana County Farm Bureau, was not merely an assimilated Mexican-American. He, like
Fabían García and many other Mesilla Valley residents, embraced reform and interethnic
engagement while also serving the local Hispanic population and preserving Hispanic
culture.44 Consuelo Marquez, who grew up in San Miguel remembered that Rodríguez as a

43 District Counsel to Chief Counsel, November 3, 1918; Elephant Butte Water Users’

44 President, Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association to Judge W.R. King, September
30, 1917; Elephant Butte Water Users’ Association, “Notice for Election of Irrigation
Ready to turn over to USRS”. *Organized Farming*, July 1918.
kind man who was an advocate for the local population, especially whenever they “had some problems with the county or the state government.”  

The Elephant Butte Irrigation District inherited the roles of the water users association, but had additional powers to tax and sell bonds to pay for improvements to the irrigation infrastructure in the Mesilla Valley. This change, in the view of Reclamation Service officials, resulted in a more financially stable organization that could afford to pay for the construction of the drainage canals, estimated at about 1.5 million dollars. The EBID entered into a contract with the Reclamation Service to expedite the construction of the drainage canals in June 1918, which were completed three years later.

The formation of the irrigation district coincided with the widespread shift in the control of acequias madres from communities to the federal government. This was not a coincidence. A.P. Davis, during his June 1917 visit to the Mesilla Valley, declared that the Reclamation Service must take over the community ditches before drainage could commence. While the San Miguel ditch was relinquished to the Reclamation Service for reasons unrelated to seepage, the other acequias madres were likely conferred to the Service due to the stresses caused by over two years of water logging. Regrettably there are no sources reflecting such sentiment (or any sentiment regarding the transfer of the community ditches). There is some evidence that the community ditch associations held out because they wanted assurances that the Reclamation Service’s planned modifications

---

to the ditches would serve the community water users’ interests.\textsuperscript{46} After all, at least eighty percent of the water users had to agree to turn the \textit{acequias} over to the federal engineers.

Reclamation Service engineers took over the community ditches, enlarged them, and replaced structures making the ditches more modern and efficient. They also installed gauges in the \textit{acequias madres} that measured the water released into the sub-laterals so water users could be charged for the amount of water they used.\textsuperscript{47} Over watering was a significant contributor to the seepage problems in the Mesilla Valley and the gauges were an effort to more rationally control the amount of water used. The Service wanted to encourage conservation through taxation.

The adoption of the community ditches by the Reclamation Service severed the historical link between community, water, and democracy. Ditch commissions became obsolete with the relinquishment of the \textit{acequias}. The functions of the commission were transferred to the Reclamation Service and Elephant Butte Irrigation District. The traditional position and role of the \textit{mayordomo} was also altered. Reclamation Service engineers did not have faith in the ability of the \textit{mayordomos} to provide water equitably and rationally, despite the fact that they had managed irrigation in the Mesilla Valley for over seventy years.\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{46} Senior Engineer, Reclamation Service, El Paso to Chief of Construction, Reclamation Service, Denver, February 4, 1916, Box 817, Folder: Rio Grande 330B-348C/348 Classification of Lands, Entry 3, RG115, NARA-DEN; Chief of Construction to Director and Chief Engineer, July 2, 1917.

\textsuperscript{47} Reclamation Service, “Project History, 1919,” Pg. 276.

\textsuperscript{48} Reclamation Service, “Annual Project History, 1918,” Pg. 117.
Even though irrigation in the valley was increasingly coming under federal control, traditional water governance continued to permeate water use in the region. The structured irrigation regime that the Reclamation Service implemented, was not unlike that practiced by the *mayordomos* and ditch commissioners prior to the Rio Grande Project. Water users still maintained the community ditches. Like the *fatiga* of the period in which the ditches were managed by the communities, an individual’s required work on the *acequias* corresponded with the amount of land one irrigated. During irrigation season, farmers were informed when the water was coming and they had to be ready when their turn came. If they missed their opportunity to irrigate, they had to wait until the next round of irrigation. The water user was allowed to use the water for as long as he, or she in some cases, pleased as long as the use was continuous. This was quite similar to the traditional water management. Water, however, did become more dependable, predictable, and measurable. Instead of the past practice of using water whenever it came, the Rio Grande Project enabled the Reclamation Service to provide water to farmers every eight days during the irrigation season.

The *mayordomos* were replaced by ditchriders, patrolmen, and gatekeepers who were employed by the Reclamation Service. There were fifteen ditchriders, eighteen patrolmen, two gatekeepers, and a seasonal repair crew working for the Reclamation Service in the Mesilla Valley in 1920. None of the ditchriders or patrolmen were Hispanic.

---

Pedro Treviz, a gatekeeper at the Mesilla Dam was the only Hispanic among the field staff. The patrolmen’s primary duty was to perform the ditchrider’s duties at night and enforce equitable water use. Gatekeepers operated the intake gates from the river and rode the ditch as needed.\textsuperscript{50} The ditchriders inherited the roles of the \textit{mayordomos}. They acted as the ditch maintenance foreman, delivered water to water users, kept records of water used, patrolled the ditches, and assisted in minor repairs, such as gopher damage, ditch breaks, collapsing banks, and clogged checks. During irrigation, the ditchrider measured the amount of water by gauging the flow in the ditch and recording the time the water was turned onto the tract and when it was turned off. Water users were then assessed a charge for the amount of water they used.

Ditchriders, often outsiders to the community, had a difficult time getting water users to follow the Reclamation service schedule. It was not unusual for a farmer to take and return water out of turn well into the federal jurisdiction over the ditches. D.C. Caylor, Associate Engineer on the Rio Grande Project noted in 1926 that the traditional water use patterns still prevailed even though the Reclamation Service had been rationalizing water use for over a decade. He describes “considerable difficulty,” in having water users stop the traditional community method of irrigation in which they simply took water and turned it back into the canals “to suit the convenience of each individual.” The engineer lamented the

fact that farmers were only gradually realizing the “advantage of [the] more orderly system” put in place by the Reclamation Service. 51

While the community ditches came under increased federal control, local secondary acequias were still maintained and managed by the water users. The Reclamation Service owned the community acequias, but did not have control over the numerous smaller ditches that conveyed water to ever smaller parcels of land and hamlets. The communities through which these ditches flowed employed their own “ditch bosses,” who performed the same duties as the ditchriders and mayordomos. These men were, apparently, not elected by the community any more, but employed by the property owners. Toshi Nakayama, who grew up in the Chamberino area in the 1920s and 1930s remembered that some remnants of traditional water management remained. Every land owner in the Chamberino area was annually required to put labor towards ditch maintenance. She stated that ditches, except the main laterals under the control of the Reclamation Service, were dug by hand and maintained by primitive tools.52 She does not discuss the existence of a mayordomo, but some formal or informal system of organizing the community for such work must have existed.


52 Toshi Nakayama, Interview by Jane O’Cain, March 14, 1997 & March 27, 1997, Interview # 210, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library; Reclamation Service, “Project History, Rio Grande Project . . . 1920,” Pg. 8; Reclamation Service, “Project History, 1919,” Pg. 276.
The period between 1905 and 1930 was marked by ever increasing federal control of water in the Mesilla Valley. Control, however, did not always equate to wholesale dominance. Even by the 1930s, tradition coexisted with the increased federal influence in the Mesilla Valley. No doubt, the Reclamation Service, through the Rio Grande Project, fundamentally reshaped the ways in which Mesilla Valley communities managed water. In the process engineers constructed and reconstructed ditches and structures in an effort to rationalize the use of water. Federal officials gained jurisdiction over the *acequias*, acquired water rights, and controlled distribution of water in an increasingly centralized organizational structure. There were also indirect changes. Shifts in land ownership, for example, altered the composition of local ditch governance.

Tradition, however, did not disappear in the face of modern engineering and administration. Communities still came together in interethnic groups to maintain their ditches, elect community leaders as officers to the EBID, and irrigate their fields. The place for tradition was narrowing, but continuity still permeated the modern federal reclamation system that was developed and implemented in the Mesilla Valley. Modern irrigation saved the residents from the manufactured drought caused by overdevelopment in Colorado. Water became dependable in the region at the cost of autonomy, but it did not erase local custom.

Indeed, tradition and change coexisted in the Mesilla Valley, often with the active participation of men like A.J. Fountain, Jr., Fabían García, and Donanciano Rodríguez. These men personified two core threads that shaped life in the Mesilla Valley. They embraced the change federal reclamation brought, but also considered the preservation of Hispanic
tradition and protection of Hispanic residents equally important. Like these men, most residents were not blind or hostile to tradition or transformation. This dynamic enabled the preservation of tradition in the face of dramatic change.
Chapter 7: Change and Continuity: Agriculture and Community 1905-1930

The Rio Grande Project resulted in significant changes in local land tenure, demographics, and traditional water governance. Shifts in property ownership and population were an indirect effect of the Rio Grande Project. Project costs and the increased value of land resulted in conditions in which Hispanic land holding decreased. New settlers brought increased diversity to the region, but they largely integrated themselves into the local, mostly Hispanic, population in the region. The manner in which federal reclamation replaced traditional water governance was much more direct. All the community ditches were under Reclamation Service control by the 1920s. Federal control, however, did not erase custom. Many of the traditions of ditch maintenance and politics were still retained by the communities, albeit on a reduced scale. Indeed, federal reclamation disrupted, but did not displace, tradition or interethnic interaction. The majority of the population in the valley was still Hispanic, and long established residents, or their children, continued to play the dominant role in local social and political arenas.

The implementation of federal reclamation resulted in both planned and unintended changes in agriculture and rural community life. Even though Reclamation Service officials had always venerated the small self-sufficient family farm, they paved the way for greater market integration and the reduction of crop diversity, largely due to the increased expense of farming in the Mesilla Valley. Cotton, a quintessential market crop, became nearly ubiquitous by the late 1920s, but it did not change the fundamental characteristics of life in the Mesilla Valley. The Rio Grande Project merely resulted in changes in crop cultivation that pulled some residents more forcefully into the market. It did not replace an
insular subsistence economy with a market economy. In fact, local farmers had participated in market agriculture since the 1840s.

Shifts in cultivation, however, were only one component of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. Like most farming regions, work, community, and crops were intertwined. There was no strict separation between the field and the village or town. Again, this was a characteristic of Mesilla Valley life that dated to the fledgling settlements of the 1840s. Farming did not occur independent of community. Even after the implementation of federal reclamation, success relied on local, usually interethnic, interaction in an environment where differences were muted by common experience. Indeed, local tradition coexisted with the transformations reclamation wrought. This tension between change and continuity remained an integral facet of life in the Mesilla Valley into the 1930s.

The history of cultivation and the market integration of Mesilla Valley farmers illuminates the ambivalent nature of the Rio Grande Project. Federal reclamation did not bring the local farmers to the market. Residents had practiced a mix of commercial and non-commercial agriculture for decades. There is evidence that Mesilla Valley farmers were engaged in the market as early as the 1840s when the Chihuahua branch of the Santa Fe Trail passed near Doña Ana. The development of mines, military installations, and other settlements in the region after 1848 only served to expand Mesilla Valley markets. The arrival of the railroad further extended marketing possibilities. Some residents, both Hispanic and non-Hispanic, were even looking to the European market by the 1890s.

Indeed, at the inception of the Rio Grande Project, Mesilla Valley farm products flowed to markets along established corridors. Harvests were sold in nearby regional
towns in Texas, Mexico, and New Mexico. In addition to selling their crops locally and regionally, Mesilla Valley farmers used the railroads to tap into markets in the southern and eastern United States for their early season vegetables and sold fruits and alfalfa in Louisiana and as far south as central Mexico.1 This pattern continued after federal reclamation arrived. Reclamation Service officials noted in 1919 that five-hundred train cars of melons were shipped to Eastern markets and other products were sent to various markets in the Untied States and Mexico.2 Clearly, Mesilla Valley residents were not economically isolated or merely living a subsistence lifestyle when federal reclamation arrived. They were not suspicious of the modern market based agriculture that the Rio Grande project would firmly reinforce in the Mesilla Valley beginning in the 1920s.

At the same time, farmers were generally not dedicating all their land to market crops. Before federal reclamation, farms typically consisted of diversified combinations of vegetable crops that included chile, onions, tomatoes, garlic, corn, lentils, beans, squash, and melons. Melons were often also planted on ditch banks with the vines trailing upon the sides of the ditches. Orchards and vineyards complimented the vegetable, grain, and melon

1 United States Reclamation Service, “Project History: Rio Grande Project – Texas-New Mexico, From Inception to December 31, 1912,” 1913, Box 461, Folder: Rio Grande, Volume 1, 1913, Entry 10, RG 115, NARA-DEN, Pg. 2.

crops either at the farm or home site. Mexican settlers brought the first fruit trees and grape vines into the Mesilla Valley. Initially the trees were planted near homes for shade and personal use, but by 1868 farmers were planting orchards to grow fruit, especially apples, to sell locally and ship to markets outside the Mesilla Valley. Orchards were well established in the Mesilla Valley in 1905.

Vegetable and fruit crops were usually supplemented with grains before the water famine. Nearby military installations provided a lucrative market for the grains. The arrival of the railroad undermined the local grain trade after the military entered into contractual arrangements to purchase grain from Midwestern farmers. Local farmers did not turn away from the market with the demise of the grain contracts. They quickly began growing alfalfa, which became the most important market crop in the Mesilla Valley by the late 1880s. This was for good reason. It commanded a good price and was drought tolerant. Each acre of alfalfa yielded an average of three to four tons of hay each year and, by 1902, sold for $12-$18 per ton. Land dedicated to alfalfa far outstripped all other crops in 1905. Residents grew much more alfalfa than they needed for personal or local use. In years when the price for alfalfa was high, farmers planted the crop right up to the walls of their homes in order to take advantage of market conditions. While alfalfa was the predominant market crop, all farm products that were not destined for home use were traded or sold in regional markets prior to 1905.

The original Mexican grants establishing many of the Mesilla Valley communities stipulated that settlers had small home plots in town and larger agricultural plots outside town.
Observers of the Mesilla Valley in the first fifteen years of federal reclamation reported remarkably similar conditions. About 65 percent of the Mesilla Valley was planted in alfalfa in 1910. This clearly indicates that alfalfa remained the most important market crop in the valley. Yields continued to be about three tons per acre and, once baled, alfalfa sold for about $12.50 a ton in 1910. The production and price of alfalfa remained quite stable. It was still the leading crop in the Mesilla Valley in 1915 and was planted on 60 percent of the irrigable land. The price of alfalfa increased to $16.00 per ton in 1916. A year later, the price rose to $27 dollars per ton because production dropped considerably due to seepage. Similar conditions were reported for 1918. Alfalfa remained the dominant crop in the Mesilla Valley into the early 1920s. Farmers grew alfalfa because they could make money off the crop, not because it was culturally important or a major component of a subsistence economy. The increasing cost of farming after the implementation of the Rio Grande Project made this strategy ever more important. Most farmers were financially struggling and they needed to grow crops that they could sell.

A wide variety of crops were grown on land not dedicated to alfalfa, but it is clear that access to the market remained an important consideration in what to plant. Twenty percent of the valley was planted in corn and beans, traditional Hispanic crops, in 1910.

While corn was only used locally, it was reported that beans found a ready market at good prices. Bean cultivation remained an important facet of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley, even as land began changing hands and new settlers moved into the Mesilla Valley. The Non-Hispanic settlers who purchased land from Hispanic residents did not usually import new cultivars. They continued to grow beans and other traditional Mesilla Valley crops. Acreages dedicated to the legumes, while small compared to alfalfa, were relatively unchanged as late as 1915. The bean crop had become less robust by 1920, largely due to the water logging problems that plagued the valley in the last half of the 1910s. About 350 acres were planted in the crop in 1920, but production and prices were still good. 5

Chile, traditionally grown by Hispanic residents, complimented corn and beans and retained a place on Mesilla Valley farms. It was a very productive crop that occupied a place at the intersection of the market and subsistence. Farmers picked the green variety up to 10 times a year. Red, or ripe, chile was harvested twice a year. J.W. Nelson, a scientist with the United States Department of Agriculture, wrote in 1910 that chile crop yielded up to 15,000 pounds per acre and sold for 15-20 cents per pound in regional markets. Nelson also noted that chile was an important food among Hispanics, but that it was becoming more popular among "Americans" every year.6 A small chile canning operation had existed in the Mesilla Valley since the 1890s and while the vast majority of chile growers were Hispanic, some non-Hispanic farmers also raised the crop. Interest in marketing chile


continued into the 1910s. Mesilla Valley residents, in 1913, raised funds to construct a cooperative cannery in Las Cruces, specifically to preserve chiles and tomatoes for the market.\textsuperscript{7} Fabián García, a noted horticulturalist and agricultural expert in New Mexico, was intimately interested in chile cultivation. He worked to preserve traditional crops while he assisted the Reclamation Service and local farm bureau in their efforts to reach Spanish-speaking residents as they tried to counteract what they saw as primitive farming practices.\textsuperscript{8}

Reclamation Service observers never mention chile in their analysis of crops in the Mesilla Valley prior to the 1930s. They did not encourage its cultivation in their correspondence and reports, even though chile was one of the most valuable crops, per acre, grown in the valley. The value of the peppers averaged just over 95 dollars per acre between 1919 and 1924. Chile was actually a few cents more profitable than cotton, the crop that, in the minds of federal engineers, eventually saved the Mesilla Valley.\textsuperscript{9} The reclamation engineers’ blindness to the importance of chile represents a major oversight. They regularly address such crops as millet seed and rye, which were far less significant in the valley. Chile did not fit the ideological framework into which the reclamation engineers

\textsuperscript{7} “To Build a Cannery: Las Cruces and Valley Citizens Riase Funds,” \textit{El Paso Morning Times}, September 12, 1913, Box 798, Folder: Rio Grande Project Miscellaneous Newspaper Clippings, Entry 3: General Administrative and Project Files, 1902-1919, RG115, NARA-DEN.

\textsuperscript{8} Reclamation Service, “Project History, 1920,” Pg. 116. See Chapter 3 for a more detailed discussion of Fabian Garcia’s personal and professional life.

placed the Mesilla Valley. Chile, like the Hispanic farmer, was consigned to insignificance, even if the local farmers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic saw a growing market for the peppers.

In addition to alfalfa, chile, corn, and beans, Mesilla Valley farmers also grew a wide variety of vegetables and fruits in the first years of the project, including onions, pears, apples, peaches, asparagus, cauliflower, melons, grapes, tomatoes, and sweet potatoes. All these crops were used locally and sold in regional markets whenever the prices were good.¹⁰

Some crops became more important after 1905. Onions were a consistent, but minor, crop prior to the approval of the Rio Grande Project. Nonetheless, they were already proving to be profitable by 1910, selling for $200 to $300 per acre in Chicago markets. This reflected a profit of over $120 per acre. This shift, however, was as much a product of local initiative as outside influence. Fabián García and his colleagues at the New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts began experiments on onions as early as 1903. They ascertained that onion yields could be as high as 600 pounds per acre per year.¹¹ Agricultural scientists in the Mesilla Valley always were looking for ways to make crops traditionally cultivated in the valley more productive. This was reflected in much of their research, which focused on established cultivars like sweet potatoes, apples, peaches, and


grapes. Onions continued to represent a stable, but small, component of local agriculture for the next twenty years.

The only new crop introduced in the first years of federal reclamation was sugar beets, which were grown in small acreages to feed to local livestock. Coupled with the fact that there was no readily available market for the beets and that land values were increasing, sugar beets never became an important valley crop. Holly Sugar considered building a sugar beet refinery in Las Cruces, but they never followed through on their plans. The hope, among Reclamation Service engineers and other reformers, to introduce a new strongly market driven crop in the Mesilla Valley was not realized in the first decade and a half of the Rio Grande Project.

Continuity in cultivation overshadowed change. Crops that residents had planted for decades continued to grow in fields throughout the Mesilla Valley before the 1920s. Residents, old and new, generally cultivated the same varieties of fruits, vegetables, grasses, and grains they had been growing since the 1880s. This phenomenon survived the dramatic shifts in land tenure that occurred in the first decade and a half of the project. Settlers that were moving into the Mesilla Valley were not adding novel crops to the landscape. They, instead, chose to insert themselves into the established agricultural patterns of the Mesilla Valley and plant that which their mostly Hispanic neighbors had grown for years. The most important crop, alfalfa, continued thrive on about two thirds of the farm land in the valley, even as acres cultivated increased and decreased over the years.

Mesilla Valley residents did not just have crops in common; they were in similar financial circumstances. Even when the prices for farm products were good in the first
years of federal reclamation; farmers struggled. Indeed, reclamation may have brought water, but it did not bring prosperity. Increasing land values, water duties, and other costs associated with federal reclamation placed Mesilla Valley farmers in a difficult situation.

The financial burden of cultivating crops in the Mesilla Valley in the 1910s was sobering. Farmers produced about $732,000 worth of crops in 1914, with alfalfa, orchard, corn and wheat being the dominant products, but this was not enough. They paid over 16,000 dollars just for water to irrigate over 21,000 acres in 1914.¹² While there is no specific data reflecting the cost per user, a simple calculation reveals that water users paid about $.75 per acre for irrigation. Water was only one cost of farming, and the cumulative expense of farming was outstripping the values of the farms. Four years later, landowners, on average, were losing five dollars per acre farmed. Losses remained at about five dollars per acre until the 1920s when conditions finally improved.¹³

Concerns over the cost of the project were widespread. H.L. Kent, the President of the New Mexico College of Agricultural and Mechanical Arts expressed considerable dismay about the expense of farming in the Mesilla Valley where developing a farm, paying fees, and raising crops was nearly impossible. Nathan Boyd noted in a 1916 letter to the


Reclamation Service that farmers were suffering “a heavy financial burden” because the modern irrigation system provided by the federal engineers required more intensive land management to preserve the productivity of agricultural land. This is illustrated by the fact that modern irrigation actually contributed to a decrease in farm quality. Traditionally, the river carried large volumes suspended sediment that acted as a natural fertilizer. The completion of the storage dam and reservoir resulted in a dramatic decrease in sediment load, which affected farm productivity after 1916. For the first time, valley farms needed fertilizer, a fact almost all Mesilla Valley farmers quickly ascertained. This was one of several new expenses that many of the poor farmers in the valley could not afford. Other residents noted that most local farmers had difficulty paying fees and assessments on their land.

Reclamation Service Engineers, however, did not see the expense of farming as the greatest impediment to development of the Mesilla Valley. Oro McDermith wrote in 1915 that yields and values of the crops were excellent, but that most farmers were not making a profit. He did not consider this to be a function of the increasing costs of cultivation, but

\[\text{14 Barbel Hannelore Schonfeld La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley, New Mexico: Reclamation and its Effects on Property Ownership and Agricultural Land Use” (Ph.d diss., University of Oregon, 1984), Pg. 158.}\]

rather, blamed it on “the employment of Mexican labor for all work and lax supervision.”\textsuperscript{16} The engineer’s statement reflects his own racial bias and a distaste for the fact that agriculture in the valley belied the foundational hope that reclamation would serve to foster the independent non-Hispanic family farm where one works his own land. L. M. Lawson, another Reclamation Service official, interpreted the financial problems of local farmers as a product of their own lack of innovation. He asserted, in 1918, that while the Rio Grande Project had greatly improved irrigation in the region, farms remained primitive. Most agriculture, he observed, was practiced on small plots and that sentiment was “against new methods over the old customs.”\textsuperscript{17} These criticisms were a thinly veiled condemnation of Hispanic farmers who, ironically, did not own many of these farms. Lawson made his observation well after shifts in land tenure in which Hispanic landholding shrunk, had commenced in the valley.

The critique of the lack of local innovation was also meant to signify that farmers were not modern. Machinery, of course, costs money. Poor farmers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, with fairly small farms were not likely to use the latest technology. They did not quickly embrace mechanization even as they became slightly more prosperous. John Newberry, one of the more innovative farmers in the Mesilla Valley, did not begin using


\textsuperscript{17} Reclamation Service, “Project History 1918,” Pg. 11.
machinery until the early 1950s. Similarly, Ruihei Yabumoto’s widow did not adopt machinery until the 1950s.\textsuperscript{18}

Local farming practices were, of course, shaped by local conditions. The need for mechanization was minimized by the fact that average farm size remained quite stable after the approval of the Rio Grande Project. Indeed, agricultural properties in the Mesilla Valley had always been fairly small, averaging about forty acres by the 1880s and shrinking during the water famine. Typical farms were still less than fifty acres in 1910 and they were becoming smaller. An average Mesilla Valley farm was about thirty-five acres by the end of the decade. Lawson considered the plethora of small plots a significant limitation to the development of agriculture in the Mesilla Valley. This is ironic considering the fact that A.P. Davis was insistent that farms under 40 acres would be successful in the valley.\textsuperscript{19} Regardless, small farms were less conducive to mechanization. The reticence to use modern machinery was also partly a reflection of the local labor market. There were plenty of workers available due to the shifts in land tenure that pushed some residents into wage labor. Revolutionary turmoil in Mexico also contributed to an influx of mostly unskilled labor from Mexico.

\textsuperscript{18} Virginia Newberry Taylor, Interview Ron Nelson, December 7, 1999 & January 4, 2000, Interview # 126, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library; Toshi Nakayama, Interview by Jane O’Cain, March 14, 1997 & March 27, 1997, Interview # 210, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.

Labor conditions certainly affected the way farms operated in the Mesilla Valley. There is no question that the Rio Grande Project resulted in an increase in cash wage labor and share arrangements. To be sure, such conditions existed as early as the 1880s, but they intensified with the reductions in land holdings triggered by the increased cost of farming in the Mesilla Valley after 1915. However, it appears that work was often performed cooperatively. Those farm owners who employed seasonal labor prior to 1920 usually operated the farms themselves alongside their workers. A minority of other farm owners cultivated a few acres on their own with tenants, renters, laborers, and lessees operating a significant majority of their cropped areas. There was, however, one delineation in the organization of labor. Farm owners, tenants, and lessees consisted of an interethnic mix of Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents. It was not uncommon for new settlers to enter into lease or tenant arrangements until they could afford to purchase their own farms. Laborers, however, were overwhelmingly Hispanic and likely to remain laborers for all or most of their productive lives.

The laborers, however, played an important role in valley agriculture that went beyond mere tasks. Much of the regional agricultural knowledge resided in the Hispanic population, especially the farm workers. The importance of local experience was pivotal to success in the Mesilla Valley and it was imperative that newly arrived farmers tap into the collective wisdom of long-time residents in order to succeed. John W. Newberry’s history in the Mesilla Valley sheds light on the ways newcomers adapted to local conditions.

---

Newberry was a migrant from Tennessee who developed a twenty-eight\textsuperscript{21} acre farm in 1917. He did not arrive intending to replicate Southeastern farming in the New Mexico desert. Instead, Newberry followed the established agricultural practices of the Mesilla Valley. Newberry’s first crop was alfalfa, still the most promising market crop in the region when he arrived. After success with alfalfa, Newberry planted peach trees and began growing beans and corn, which became his particular specialty. \textsuperscript{22} Newberry became well known as an innovative farmer who maintained a close relationship with Fabián García. The two men even experimented with pecan trees, a crop that became vitally important in the Mesilla Valley in the 1940s.

John Newberry’s farm operations represent a typical farm in the Mesilla Valley in the first few decades of federal reclamation. He worked his farm with the assistance of a small group of local Hispanic workers he hired from the nearby town of Piccacho. Newberry, like many of the other farmers in the valley, relied on the established Hispanic population not only to provide labor, but to instruct him on established farming practices. Ruihei Yabumoto’s experience follows a similar contour. He settled in Chamberino about the same time Newberry began farming in the valley. Yabumoto arrived in the Mesilla Valley with no farming experience and had to learn all his farming techniques from his Hispanic neighbors.\textsuperscript{23}

\textsuperscript{21} The farm eventually grew to 48 acres with subsequent acquisitions.

\textsuperscript{22} Virginia Newberry Taylor, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.

\textsuperscript{23} Virginia Newberry Taylor, NMF&RHM Oral History Project; Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.
Like many farm families, the Yabumotos and Newberrys developed long term personal relationships their workers. One man, Elias, worked for Newberry for twenty-five years. The Newberry and Elias children grew up together and the connection spanned decades and generations. Newberry’s daughter, Virginia, noted in 1999 that she was still in contact with members of Elias’s family. Ruihei Yabumoto’s daughter, Toshi, also noted that the connections between the families that worked for her mother and her family were close for years. These interpersonal connections were forged in an environment where there was plenty of labor available and such connections were not economically necessary.

The relationships were often mutually beneficial. It was not uncommon for families to assist their workers with loans or other assistance when times were hard. Some immigrants also secured United States citizenship with the aid of their employers while working in the Mesilla Valley. Other benefits were more intangible. Cruz Provencio Maya, a migrant from Mexico, learned English from the farmer that employed him for decades.

Maya’s experience provides an insight into the manner in which laborers worked in the Mesilla Valley. He found work on a farm the day he moved to San Miguel with his wife and daughter in 1916. Maya, who had a home in town, was responsible for planting, cultivating, and harvesting the crops. It appears that he typically worked for a share of the

________________________

24 Virginia Newberry Taylor, NMF&RHM Oral History Project; Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.
crop and sold his harvest to a local store for cash at the end of the season. Maya was also able to bring any food he needed home for his family’s use.  

Cruz Provencio Maya had an entrepreneurial streak. He was not merely a caricature of a laborer stuck in the past. Rather, he was, like many who came before him, engaged in the market. In addition to selling crops locally, he and his family dried and pickled a wide variety of fruits and vegetables, including chile, melons, and cherries. When winter came, Maya loaded these products onto a horse drawn cart and traveled cross county for three months visiting ranches throughout New Mexico where he sold the crops he dried and pickled during the growing season. Maya never traded his vegetables. He only sold them.

Maya, like many of his contemporaries who lived in the old Hispanic villages in the valley, was consigned to insignificance by federal officials. To them, Hispanic workers were the epitome of the “primitive” element in the region. Reclamation Service reformers were more concerned about the success of men like Newberry, not the Hispanic majority. The engineers were disappointed. They had a considerable amount of money and ideology invested in the success of farming under federal reclamation. Frustratingly, almost two decades into the Rio Grande Project most farmers were still struggling to make enough money to survive in the Mesilla Valley.

______________


26 Consuelo Marquez, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.
Reclamation Service engineers decided that the established crops in the Mesilla Valley were insufficient to ensure the economic viability of the farmers on the Rio Grande Project. After sugar beets failed to transform agriculture, they decided to put their faith in cotton as a solution to the increasing costs of farming in the valley. Local interest in cotton had existed since the 1890s, but cultivation was not initially widespread. Researchers at the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station conducted cotton experiments in 1891, but the crop did not take hold. There was concern that cotton was not well adapted to the Mesilla Valley. Experimental planting in the El Paso Valley almost thirty years later proved to challenge a previously held assumption that cotton could not be effectively cultivated in the region. Reclamation Service officials and agricultural extension officers facilitated the sowing of first cotton plants in the Mesilla Valley in 1918. The initial forays into cotton cultivation in the valley were tentative for a couple years until the first bale of locally produced cotton was auctioned in 1920.27

Reclamation Service officials reacted with alacrity and reported that cotton was going to be introduced, with their assistance, on a large scale in the Mesilla Valley after 1920. In its first year of general cultivation, cotton was second only to alfalfa in importance and acreage devoted to the crop. Cotton farming continued increasing throughout the 1920s. Geographer, Edwin Foscue describes the growth of cotton cultivation in 1931 as “almost phenomenal.” Sociologist Sigurd Johansen wrote that, cotton quickly became so

important that "the entire system of farming [was] built largely around it." 28 Reclamation Service officials could barely restrain their pleasure at the success of cotton on the Rio Grande Project. The second page of the 1924 annual project history contained a full page graphic of thriving cotton fields and rows of baled cotton with "White Gold: King Cotton on the Rio Grande Project, New Mexico - Texas" emblazoned across the center of the page.

Local farmers, however, did not mindlessly adopt cotton. Many were concerned that the introduction of the crop would lead to a monocultural region in which cotton dominated all agriculture. This was a well-grounded fear that had played out in other regions of the United States. The dramatic adoption of cotton was typical, but there were exceptions. Unlike most farmers in the Mesilla Valley, it does not appear that John Newberry ever grew cotton. The cultivation of cotton was less ubiquitous in the older settlements in the Mesilla Valley where vegetable and fruit crops were well established. This was common even among the farmers that the reclamation service considered the most "progressive," such as F.C. Barker, a local newspaper editor, ardent supporter of the agricultural college, and author of an 1898 United States Geological Survey study of irrigation in the Mesilla Valley. 29

______________________________


Established farmers were initially reluctant to plant cotton, especially if they already grew dependable, albeit less valuable, cash crops, such as orchards or alfalfa on their land. Also, older farmers, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, were less eager to plant cotton than their younger neighbors. In fact, young Hispanic and non-Hispanic farmers were much more likely to experiment with crops and they often personally persuaded their older family members and friends to try planting cotton. This does not mean that farmers ignored cotton. This was especially true among recent settlers like Ruihei Yabumoto, who settled in Chamberino about 1915. He was almost exclusively growing cotton on his twenty-five acre farm by the 1920s. Yabumoto only had a small garden of chiles, tomatoes and onions for personal use.

Regardless of whether one was a long-time resident or newcomer, the adoption of cotton was a turning point. Once a farmer planted the crop, and most eventually did, they quickly dedicated most, if not all, their land to cotton. This was a not new. Many residents began growing alfalfa in the 1880s when the prices for that crop were good. The cultivation of cotton contributed to the abandonment of vegetable plots on many farms, especially those of non-Hispanics. Cotton occupied over 75 percent of the irrigated land in the Mesilla Valley by 1928. Many traditional crops, especially wheat, corn, and alfalfa, were forced out at the expense of cotton. Fifteen percent of the valley was planted in alfalfa in 1928. Many farms that had most of their acreage in cotton still maintained a small plot in alfalfa, but most of the alfalfa was not destined for the market. It was fed to local stock and dairy cattle. As a general rule, farms did not grow appreciably after the introduction of cotton, but crop

La Mar, “Water and Land in the Mesilla Valley,” Pg. 226
diversity decreased. The average farm size, as late as 1929, was 44 acres, and according to local farmer Richard B Gary, twenty-five acres of such farms were typically dedicated to cotton with alfalfa and other feed crops growing on thirteen acres. Vegetable, fruit, and orchard crops were planted on only about two acres.31

The same economic forces that caused farmers to plant alfalfa in the 1880s influenced decisions to plant cotton. After all, the value of cotton far outstripped all other Mesilla Valley crops by 1922 and continued to increase for the rest of the decade. By the middle of the 1920s, one acre of the crop provided income equal to the value of the land upon which it grew. Cotton was so valuable that it just made more sense to plant the crop and purchase vegetables at the grocery store. The good cotton prices allowed farmers to make payments and, in good years, save some money, or purchase luxuries. In this way cotton served to tie residents more forcefully into the market and away from the semi-subsistence patterns that had defined life in the Mesilla Valley before the 1920s.32

It appeared to Reclamation Service officials that cotton was the answer to the financial challenges the Rio Grande Project presented. They noted, by 1923, that the indebtedness of landowners, a problem since the beginning of the project, was ameliorating. The newfound prosperity was partly an illusion. Land prices continually escalated and fewer settlers could afford land in the valley. Many of the residents who


already lived in the Mesilla Valley may have been in better economic condition that in previous years, but they were still mostly poor. According to Toshi Nakayama there were very few wealthy people amongst her neighbors and that, in fact, all the “families were really struggling.” Consuelo Marquez, the daughter of a farm laborer, described San Miguel the same way. She said that everyone was poor. The only “rich” person was Donanciano Rodriguez, who was an member of La Alianza Hispano Americana, a director of the farm bureau, an officer with the EBID, and a probate judge. She also remembered Rodriguez a kind man who was available to help with any problems community members may have. 33

Indeed, the success of cotton belied the foundational ideal of federal reclamation that family farmers of meager means settle the land. Federal observers nonetheless cast the situation in a positive light. To be sure, they lamented that land values had increased to the point that “only those who have made a success of farming could be induced to buy.” Average farmers could not afford the $20,000 it would cost to purchase and develop a 50-acre farm. In the end, the reclamation engineers argued that this was not a bad thing because farmers that could purchase the land would be “good ones.” 34 The “good ones” were farmers who were not Hispanic or poor. They were fully integrated with the market and, most likely, cultivating cotton exclusively.

33 Conseuelo Marquez, NMF&RHM Oral History Project; Toshi Nakayama, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.

One thing the reclamation engineers could count on was that most farms would remain small. The long established settlement patterns and dominance of small plots of land in combination with the high land values typically limited the size of farms into the post World War II era. Successful farmers who wanted to expand their operations typically purchased disparate small plots, instead of consolidating land into large holdings. For example, as John Newberry purchased three other farms in the Mesilla Valley that he leased to other farmers on a cash or share basis.\textsuperscript{35} Another farmer, Cowan Jones, owned five properties throughout the Mesilla Valley in the early 1940s. The farms ranged in size from forty acres to nearly 250 acres. He did not directly operate any of his parcels.

Small farms were typical, but there was one notable exception. Stahmann Farms, the largest agricultural operation in the Mesilla Valley, was developed in the 1920s and 1930s. The nearly 3,000 acre farm was purchased by W.J. Stahmann and his son Deane in the early 1920s. This was their second farm. The elder Stahmann and his family settled near Fabens Texas in 1909 where they developed a diversified farm raising tomatoes, honey, and cotton. They also constructed a cotton gin and compress and a tomato cannery on their property, which grew as large as 1,400 acres. W.J. Stahmann was previously a director of the El Paso Water Improvement District, the Texas counterpart of the Elephant Butte Irrigation District. The Texas farm was clearly successful, because Stammann and his son Deane acquired the majority of the Santo Tòmas Farms Company lands in 1924. The land they purchased was mostly uncleared and uncultivated. The Stahmann's developed a farm that was initially quite diversified. They grew cotton, alfalfa, onions, lettuce, rye, melons, 

\textsuperscript{35} Virginia Newberry Taylor, NMF&RHM Oral History Project.
and sugar beets, in addition to livestock and fowl. Eventually the farm became completely dedicated to pecan orchards. Deane Stahamnn began planting pecan trees in 1932. By the 1940s Stahmann was the leading producer of pecans in the world. The farm, now owned by Sally Stahmann-Solis, remains the largest privately owned pecan orchard in the world.

Except for the notable exception of Stahamann Farms, agricultural properties in the Mesilla Valley remained small even after the introduction of cotton. Federal reclamation brought cotton to the Mesilla Valley, but it did not change the physical ways in which farms were organized. Indeed, like land tenure and irrigation, agriculture was transformed by the implementation of federal reclamation, but strong currents of continuity shaped and mediated changes that modern irrigation brought. Instead of reinventing Mesilla Valley agriculture, the Rio Grand Project was integrated into local traditions and trends. Similar resiliency, both physical and social, was apparent in nearly all aspects of Mesilla Valley life.

Conclusion: The Resiliency of Local Practice

There is little question that federal reclamation and cotton cultivation brought significant change to the Mesilla Valley. These transformations disproportionately affected Hispanic residents whose political and community roles became more constrained as Non-Hispanic residents came to dominate the control of water and land. Hispanic mayordomos, for example, were no longer pivotal components in community politics and irrigation. Wage labor or tenant and share arrangements became common after 1905, resulting in a labor system that racialized many Hispanics as unskilled workers. Opportunities for subsistence agriculture had long passed. Nonetheless, the core traditions of interaction and the social and physical foundations of rural community still shaped life for most Mesilla Valley residents, Hispanic and non-Hispanic. While local conditions and social spaces had changed since 1905, they largely reflected the resiliency and malleability of community traditions and structures that developed decades before the Rio Grande Project began. Hispanic cultural characteristics were still evident throughout the valley and interethnic interaction remained a cornerstone of local day-to-day life into the 1930s. Residents, however, were never insular or so traditional that they were not open to change. Indeed, the Mesilla Valley, by the 1930s, reflected a region imbued with both a sense of tradition and modernity.

Tradition was not static. The mayrodomo, a pivotal link in the integration of water and community was no longer at the center of the water democracies that shaped social and political life in the Mesilla Valley before the 1920. Nonetheless the role of the
mayordomo was reinvented as a leader among workers. Each of Cowan Jones’ farms was under the supervision of a Hispanic foreman who had considerable authority and autonomy. The foremen, also called mayordomos, were responsible for all farm operations, from hiring labor and providing for the workers needs, to repairing equipment and working in the fields as needed. The foremen were provided houses on the farms and trucks free of charge and were paid a daily wage. According to farm manager, Richard B. Gary, the foremen also acted in an advisory role and were expected to “offer suggestions which may prove advantageous to the farming industry.” The foremen clearly played an important role in local agriculture, both as workers and advisors.1

This reinvention of the mayordomo was most comprehensively adopted at Stahmann Farms, the most industrial operation in the Mesilla Valley in the 1920s and 1930s. Labor at the farm was based on an innovative, if paternalistic, farm management scheme tailored to the cultural realities of the Mesilla Valley. Deane Stahmann, who took over development of the farm after his father died in 1926, divided his property into communities of workers called ranchos. The first ranchos were established before the land was cleared or irrigation ditches constructed. There were eventually eleven ranchos, each responsible for cultivating a 400 acre section of the farm. They were Palmillo, Oeste, Sur, Norte, Rincon, Ojito, Plaza, Esperanza, Christo, and La Fe. Each rancho had about fifteen families who resided on the site in free housing year-round. The ranchos had plazas, stores, 

---

and multipurpose buildings used for school, Catholic mass, and dances. Many of Stahmann's workers were migrants from Mexico and the ranchos were designed to replicate the social and communal characteristics of their home communities.

Each rancho had a Hispanic foreman who was expected to both provide for the needs of the workers and ensure that work was completed. It was no coincidence that these men were called mayordomos. Both Stahmann and the workers considered them important members of the rancho communities. The mayordomos, who lived in the ranchos and were part of the worker communities were invested with considerable autonomy in planning and organizing work on Stahmann's farm.

Mayordomos had two overarching responsibilities. They played an important economic role through their power to organize and oversee work. Indeed, the mayordomo had complete control over the labor force and work arrangements. They also managed the maintenance of irrigation ditches and the application of water. The foreman also played pivotal social roles. For example, when migrants arrived at the farm, the mayordomos often overturned the housing arrangements stipulated by Stahmann or his farm manager and placed the new residents with families and friends. This resulted in a situation in which each rancho was populated by migrants from the same part of Mexico. Mayordomos also mediated worker grievances and disputes within the rancho communities and acted as

\footnote{Theresa M. Hanley, “The Stahmann Farms Migrant Community” (MA Thesis, New Mexico State University, 1991) Pgs. 24-5, 26, 28, 29.}

\footnote{Hanley, “The Stahmann Farms Migrant Community,” Pgs. 2,9, 62.}

\footnote{Hanley, “The Stahmann Farms Migrant Community,” Pg. 18-19, 60.}
intermediaries between Stahmann and his resident workers. Finally, *mayordomos* assisted workers in acquiring their United States citizenship. Consuelo Marquez who resided in a Stahmann *rancho* for part of her life recalled some workers from Mexico considered their time at Stahmann's a bridge to United States citizenship. In this manner, Stahmann Farms developed into an intermediate zone in which workers spent some time working on the property before settling elsewhere in the Mesilla Valley, or farther afield.5

Stahmann, who was considered generous and generally held in high regard by his workers, was not completely altruistic in his motivations. The development of a community of workers served his fundamental need to attract and retain workers. Nonetheless, he apparently understood the importance of cultural preservation and the importance of leisure activities in creating community solidarity. Stahmann hosted 16 de Septiembre celebrations, a harvest festival, and a fiesta honoring the *San Isidro*, the patron saint of farmers. He also organized sporting events and other community activities. Finally, He held large community wide celebrations at his home. Local residents, Mexican movie stars, and migrant workers attended these Stahmann parties, which must have been quite a strange juxtaposition. At the other end of the economic spectrum, the *ranchos* themselves organized their own festivals. Consuelo Marquez lived in *rancho* for a short time after her

marriage. She fondly remembered festivals with dancing, games, and "a lot of food" in each little enclave at Stahmann Farms. 

Public and semi-public leisure activity remained an integral component of social life throughout the Mesilla Valley. This was a feature that continued into the post World War II era. Sociologist Sigurd Johansen surveyed many of the Mesilla Valley's small agricultural hamlets in the 1940s and concluded that visiting with friends and relatives within their communities was the most important social activity followed by dances and attending movies. Dances were typically events that attracted participants from the entire community and sometimes nearby villages. Mesilla Valley denizens also organized and attended radio parties and radio dances. Residents of the small communities traveled to regional centers, such as Mesilla and Las Cruces to attend movies. Reclamation Service officials noticed, by 1927, that there was an appreciable increase in the number of people attending theaters in the Las Cruces area. No doubt, many attended the Fountain Theater, owned by another champion of Hispanic cultural preservation and progress, A.J. Fountain, Jr. 

______________________________


The community gatherings were often known by several Spanish names, including *tardeadas, pachangas,* and *bailes* depending on the size and formality of the fiesta. They were all organized as open affairs, which anyone could attend. Such gatherings were the most common manner in which residents of the smaller farming communities socialized in the 1920s and 1930s. Marciel Sambrano, who grew up in Doña Ana, recalled that the *tardeadas* were held almost every Saturday during the summer. There was Mexican food including “enchiladas and tamales,” and people danced to music played by friends and family. These were community events. Sambrano stated that friends from all over the valley and “almost everybody in Doña Ana went” to the social gatherings.8

Community picnics were also ubiquitous in the Mesilla Valley before and after federal reclamation. These were often interethnic gatherings to which entire communities were invited. Some gatherings were social and others were commemorative or informative. John Newberry and his wife, for example, regularly hosted Easter picnics and Christmas celebrations and specifically invited the Hispanic community of Old Picacho.9 Groups as diverse in their purpose as local drama clubs, the farm bureau, and the *Alianza de Hispano Americana* hosted community picnics. The gatherings typically included live music, recreation, and, of course, food, including “American,” and “Mexican” food.10 Picnics


9 Virginia Newberry Taylor, Interview Ron Nelson, December 7, 1999 & January 4, 2000, Interview # 126, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.

10 “Localidades,” *Tiempo,* July 16, 1904, Pg. 3; “Localidades,” *Tiempo,* April 29, 1905, Pg. 3; “Locales y Personales,” *Eco del Valle,* July 28, 1906, Pg 3; “Localidades,” *Tiempo,* July 4,
became interchangeable with "enchilada suppers" by the 1930s. While the details of the suppers varied, they followed a typical pattern. Women’s groups, Hispanic and non-Hispanic, secular and religious, prepared Mexican food and invited the public to attend functions which were often fund raisers, meetings, or celebrations.\textsuperscript{11} An interethnic mix of residents attended these enchilada suppers.

The fact that Mesilla Valley residents were still coming together in public spaces and private homes to share Mexican food, listen to music, exchange ideas, and recreate reveals the durability of custom in the face of change. Established traditions of interethnic interaction remained important to many residents. Most community gatherings were open to Hispanic and non-Hispanic attendance, even if groups were not always ethnically mixed. Farm bureau picnics, for example, were open to all residents and advertised in English and Spanish, but tended to attract a largely Non-Hispanic group of attendees. Moreover, it was typical for Spanish language translators to be in attendance at all public meetings and other informative events.\textsuperscript{12}

\textsuperscript{11} “Enchilada Supper” \textit{Estrella}, October 10, 1931, Pg 3; [No Title] \textit{Mesilla Valley Bulletin}, February 8, 1935, Pg. 2.

\textsuperscript{12} “Some Interpreter,” \textit{Organized Farming}, May-June 1919, Box 13, Folder 6: EBID Subject File 1906-1925 Misc Subjects and Correspondence, Organized Farming File, Elephant Butte Irrigation District Subject File, Rio Grande Historical Collections, New Mexico State University Library.
Food, a cornerstone of ethnic identity and community life, was important at the festivals and other gatherings. Like so many other aspects of life in the Mesilla Valley, Hispanic tradition was resilient in cuisine. The preservation of Mexican food tradition was not limited to establishments like Chopes, Longina Benavides' restaurant of humble beginnings.\textsuperscript{13} Refugio Amador, a member of one of the most elite families in the Mesilla Valley, maintained a connection with her Mexican heritage through culinary traditions. The Amadors were merchants and hoteliers with roots in the Mesilla Valley going back to the 1850s. The Amador Hotel, first opened in 1878, was a social center in Las Cruces well into the twentieth century. It attracted an interethnic mix of local elites, celebrities, politicians, and other prominent individuals. Historian Jeffery Pilcher writes that even though Refugio was shopping at Bloomingdales in New York City in the late nineteenth century, she kept a manuscript cookbook that preserved the dishes of Mexico.\textsuperscript{14} Admittedly, the dishes were not the simple enchiladas that Benviades served, but they still were a reflection of cultural continuity. Toshi Nakayama recalled in an oral history that the women of Chamberino made flour tortillas and tamales for special occasions and celebrations; such as the June 1917 community meeting they had with the director of the Reclamation Service.\textsuperscript{15}

\textsuperscript{13} See Chapter 5.


\textsuperscript{15} Toshi Nakayama, Interview by Jane O’Cain, March 14, 1997 & March 27, 1997, Interview # 210, Transcript, NMF&RHM Oral History Project, Archives and Special Collections, New Mexico State University Library.
The preservation of Mexican food traditions did not mean that local Hispanic residents eschewed other foods. Local newspapers occasionally carried recipes that reflected an international perspective. For example, a recipe for turtle soup was published in the 3 February 1917 issue of Estrella. The article, written by a professor from the agricultural college, describes the dish as being native to the islands of Java, Fiji, Sumatra, and Australia, but that with some ingenuity it could be made cheaply in the Mesilla Valley, especially since the turtles could be “harvested” from the acequia madre. In order to provide the reader with some context, the dish is described as being similar to Mole de Guajolote, a quintessential Mexican dish. 16 The fact that the soup could be made with ingredients, like turtles, which were available at no cost to anyone who could find them in the ditches, illuminates an underlying characteristic of life in the Mesilla Valley, even after the introduction of cotton. Cotton did improve the financial situation of Mesilla Valley farmers, but there were still economic challenges in the valley in the 1920s and 1930s.

Music, like food, was a common fixture at all Mesilla Valley social gatherings. A study of Hispanic folk music traditions in the Mesilla Valley revealed that that unlike regions, such as south Texas, in which racist non-Hispanic regimes moved in quickly to displace established populations, the Mesilla Valley musicians did not sing about racism or social injustice. Instead of composing corridos that focused on resistance and conflict, Mesilla Valley residents sang about local history, love, death, women, and animals. Some corridos that came with migrants from Mexico related themes of the Mexican Revolution and iconic Mexican historical figures. The music was, and remains, a reflection of culture among a

population that was not dramatically undermined by racism, class division and overt ethnic discrimination.\textsuperscript{17}

Historian Joan Jensen has written several articles about New Mexican farm women, including those in the Mesilla Valley. She writes that Hispanic and non-Hispanic farm women in New Mexico had a common bond, because most were “desperately poor,” in the 1920s and 1930s. Mesilla Valley farmers were in slightly better economic shape than many other regions, but the financial burdens of farming were still widely felt. The ubiquitous poverty resulted in solidarity. According to Jensen, conflict that did exist was typically directed at outsiders who threatened their communities.\textsuperscript{18} This was a tradition that had shaped life in the Mesilla Valley for decades and was not limited to women. The interethnic \textit{Juntas de Inidignacion} were still an component of public expression in New Mexico into the 1930s.

Women in the agricultural settlements and on the farms practiced labor exchange, bartered goods, and shared knowledge. This was especially pronounced among Hispanic women who taught new settlers in the Mesilla Valley how to prepare chile, cook beans, and make tortillas. They also introduced new residents to long established traditions of effective food preservation, namely drying and pickling. The Hispanic women, however, were not opposed to modern methods and techniques if they saw value in them. Some

\textsuperscript{17} L’Acqua, "Mexican American Folk Music," Pg. 26, 61-2, 80-2.

\textsuperscript{18} Joan M. Jensen, “‘I’ve Worked and I’m Not Afraid of Work: Farm Women in New Mexico, 1920-1940,” \textit{New Mexico Historical Review}, Volume 61: Number 1 (January 1986), Pgs. 28-29.
Hispanic women adopted canning, a technique aggressively pushed by farm bureau home demonstration agents.\(^{19}\)

For most women, one of the greatest hindrances to modernization was financial. Farm women often could not afford modern technology, even if they were eager to use it. They addressed financial limitations the same way framers had confronted economic challenges since the 1880s. Like many of their fathers and husbands, who had long pooled their resources to ease the expenses of innovation and production, they purchased expensive items like pressure cookers cooperatively. Hundreds of pressure cookers were sold to women in the Mesilla Valley in the 1920s in this manner.\(^{20}\)

As with work and labor, interaction and cooperation shaped social life in varying degrees long after the initiation of the Rio Grande Project and even the introduction of cotton. Reclamation Service officials noted, in 1920, that there was a “very lively and community spirit” in the Las Cruces area. They noted throughout the decade that a wide variety social organizations, such as women’s clubs and agricultural clubs were established throughout the Mesilla Valley.\(^{21}\)


\(^{20}\) Jensen, “‘I’ve Worked and I’m Not Afraid of Work,” Pgs. 44-5.

The federal engineers were silent on the ethnic make-up of such organizations, but it appears that separate Hispanic and non-Hispanic organizations were established. This was particularly evident with youth clubs. The Extension Service demonstration agent for Doña Ana County noted in 1917 that a Spanish speaking girls club in Mesilla was so accomplished that they were recognized as the “champion club in the state” for their canning, needlework, and musical performances. Donanciano Rodriguez’s wife, Juliana, organized a Spanish speaking girls club in San Miguel. 22 The existence of Spanish and English language clubs reflects that fact the community was becoming segregated along ethnic lines. It is true that there were few interethnic youth clubs in the Mesilla Valley and those that did exist only had one or two Hispanic members, but Joan Jenson in her analyses of rural women in New Mexico and extension work in the state, argues that this was more a function of culture than racism. Hispanic families and children were less interested in formal organizations and meetings than their Non-Hispanic counterparts, especially if those groups were led by Non-Hispanic outsiders. When organizers realized this they began forming Hispanic clubs that took family relationships and community and kin networks into account. This was the main reason the separate Spanish language clubs were established. 23 The existence of the Spanish language clubs also reflects the resiliency of Hispanic culture in the valley. After all, the preservation of the Spanish language was one of


23 Jensen, “Canning Comes to New Mexico,” Pg. 372.
the main goals of the *Alianza Hispano Americana*. In this sense the clubs were a reflection of
the intersection of the modern change pursued by the agricultural extension service and
the cultural preservation that men like Fabián García championed.

Many of the meetings, fiestas, and clubs were related to agriculture and the Rio
Grande project, both of which came to dominate life in the Mesilla Valley after 1905. In fact,
irrigation and farming were defining characteristics of the community since the first
settlements of the 1840s. The Reclamation Service (later the Bureau of Reclamation)
enGINEERS Brought a modernizing reformist impulse to the Mesilla Valley and saved local
agriculture from the damage caused by irrigation development in Colorado’s San Luis
Valley. Most aspects of the federal reclamation project tapped into conditions and
traditions that were already established in the Mesilla Valley. The engineers did not create
profitable farming in the Mesilla Valley, or even bring local Hispanic residents out of a
subsistence lifestyle to a market oriented outlook. The adoption of cotton, while
representing a shift in cultivation and bringing a bit more prosperity, did not bring farmers
into the market. Valley cultivators had grown crops for the market since the 1840s. Even
though they were integrated into the market, Hispanic residents were characterized as
being unprogressive by many non-Hispanic reformers. Established residents, Hispanic and
non-Hispanics did not shun change. They adopted crops and agricultural methods as they
realized their value. If they had the means, farmers purchased radios, pressure cookers,
and other modern conveniences. Again, local farmers regardless of their ethnicity had
always been open to change when it served their interests.
This openness to change was accompanied by a strong Mexican ethnic identity and attachment to tradition that was preserved in spite of federal reclamation. While the engineers, for the most part, ignored or maligned the long established traditions and conditions in the valley, they did not erase them. Farms remained small and unmechanized. More important, Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents continued to rely on each other and interact across ethnic lines. New residents depended on the knowledge of their mostly Hispanic neighbors. They also counted on the labor of Hispanic residents who resided in the old agricultural hamlets. This was a relationship that often went deeper than employer/employee. While class division and racism certainly increased over the years, many residents formed long lasting interethnic relationships that extended beyond the fields and into the communities. Local public meeting halls, plazas, parks, and homes hosted, or at least courted, mixed groups where Hispanic traditions became a centerpiece of social interaction.

The resiliency of the Hispanic past was captured by the Bureau of Reclamation in 1933. Agency photographers visited the Mesilla Valley in the early 1930s. They recorded a variety of images, including a diversity of farmers’ homes. Unlike 1908 when a Craftsman style bungalow was labeled “typical”, the photographer chose to describe a home with strong Hispanic architectural influence as “typical” (Figure 7). The image of a small home constructed of adobe brick with a flat roof was a symbol of the endurance of tradition. Federal Reclamation did not erase local histories of interaction and identity. The home is located on a small plot of land. Again this reflects continuity. Though many reclamation projects, especially after the 1930s, resulted in the consolidation of land into vast industrial
farms, most farms in the Mesilla Valley were still quite small. The fathers of federal reclamation would have been pleased.

Figure 7: “Rio Grande: A Typical Home on the Rio Grande Project,” 1933. (Source: Bureau of Reclamation, Entry JX, RG 115, Box 170: Rio Grande Project, New Mexico, NARA-Archives II, College Park, MD)

The image also shows transformation. The home, unlike traditional Hispanic settlement patterns is isolated among fields instead of consolidated in a village. The establishment of farmsteads and suburban farms, rather than the traditional villages with separate farmlands was more and more common in the Mesilla Valley by the 1930s.
Finally, the fields themselves show small cotton plants sprouting on an almost sterile landscape. There are no orchard trees or even garden crops visible in the image. One may assume that the homeowner, likely a recent settler, had put his faith in cotton in order to pay for his expensive new farm. He, at the same time, built a home that reflected the local history of the Mesilla Valley. In this manner the photograph encapsulates the first two decades of the Rio Grande Project in which tradition coexisted with transformation, a trend that continued into the post war era.

This dissertation’s conclusions are important for several reasons. First, there have been no thorough academic historical studies that address the social history the Rio Grande Project. My dissertation corrects that omission and shows how federal power was implemented in a largely Hispanic region from the first decade of the twentieth century to the New Deal Era. It adds to the historiographical narrative that addresses the ways in which the state interacts with communities, especially Hispanic communities. The experiences of engineers and farmers in the Mesilla Valley reveals that established cultural customs were not erased by the transformations that reclamation brought. Indeed, traditions of interaction and adaptability served to protect local practice. Second, like Doñald Pisani and Stephen Bogener, I show that reclamation was shaped by the interaction of federal and local interests and unintended consequences. Moreover, I show that the reclamation engineers themselves viewed the valley in a racially biased manner. They consigned Hispanics to a declining past while venerating new non-Hispanic settlers. In the meantime, Hispanic and non-Hispanic residents often learned that they had to rely on each other to effectively farm. Third, I describe the ways in which local practice and federal reclamation sought to shape the environment and how the environment helped to shape
community. The environmental dimensions of the project were broad with transnational and interstate dimensions. They were also focused, as residents and, eventually, engineers contended with floods, drought, water famine, seepage, and declining soil fertility.

Ultimately local traditions of interaction were as important to the ways in which federal reclamation was implemented, as were the new dams and ditches. Mesilla Valley residents had long relied on community based organizations and strategies to manage water and confront threats. The towns were fundamentally shaped by the water democracies that dictated the management of the acequias. Residents had come to rely on communal strategies, such as petitions and juntas de indignacion, to confront threats to their well-being or express their interests. Residents were, however, not insular or resistant to change. They had been involved in the market since the 1840s and were willing to grow crops that served the market. They also adopted wage labor to support themselves during the water famine of the 1890s and even sold of portions of their land to survive the crisis. Finally, there was an elite class that included such leaders as A.J. Fountain, Jr., who ran a theater that catered to the local Hispanic population, Fabían García, a professor who championed green chile and ethnic pride, and Donanciano Rodriguez, a community leader and farm bureau officer who represented the interests of his Hispanic neighbors. These men all celebrated and advocated for Hispanic tradition while they embraced modern change, such as that presented by the Reclamation Service. These characteristics allowed for local social and community resiliency in the face of the dramatic changes that federal reclamation represented and implemented.
Bibliography

Primary Sources

Archival Sources

National Archives and Records Administration, Denver Colorado.
- Record Group 49: General Land Office, New Mexico.
- Record Group 83: United States Bureau of Agricultural Economics.
- Record Group 114: USDA Soil Conservation Service, Southwest Region.
- Record Group 115: Records of the Bureau of Reclamation.
- Record Group 355: Records of the National Agricultural Statistics Service.

Rio Grande Historical Collections, Las Cruces, New Mexico.
- 1974-017. Records of Doña Ana County 1852-1946.
- MS 2 Freudenthal Family Papers.
- MS 4. Amador Family Papers.
- MS 38. Hoagland Family Papers.
- MS 235. Elephant Butte Irrigation District Records
- MS 440. Casad-Lane Family Papers
- MS 0145. Pendelton R. Fuller Collection.
- MS 0418. Jack Newberry Collection.
- MS 0456. Doñald Casad Bennett Family Papers.
- MS 0470. Casad-Mandell Family Papers.
- UA 011. Fabían García Papers.
Microfilm


Legislation and Court Cases


The Territorial Institutions Act Of 1889. (New Mexico House Bill No. 186).

Congressional Records


Oral histories


Newspapers

Defensor del Pueblo, Mesilla, NM, 1891.
Doña Ana County Republican, Las Cruces NM, 1897-1902.
Eco del Valle, Las Cruces NM, 1905-1916.
El Labrador, Las Cruces NM, 1896-1912.
El Paso Times, El Paso TX, 1884-1940.
Las Cruces Daily News, Las Cruces NM, 1889.
Las Cruces Democrat, Las Cruces NM, 1892-1899.
Las Cruces Progress, Las Cruces NM, 1902-1904.
La Estrella, Las Cruces NM, 1911-1935.
Mesilla News, Mesilla NM, 1879-1883.
Mesilla Valley Democrat, Las Cruces NM, 1886-1890.
Promotor Escolar, Las Cruces NM, 1891-1892.
Tiempo, Las Cruces NM, 1882-1911.

Published Sources


Bloodgood, Dean W. *Drainage in the Mesilla Valley of New Mexico*. Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1921.
—Net Requirements of Crops for Irrigation Water in the Mesilla Valley, New Mexico. Las Cruces, N.M. New Mexico College of Agriculture And Mechanic Arts, Agricultural Experiment Station, 1925.


Coon, Danise, Eric Votava, and Paul Bosland. The Chile Cultivars of New Mexico State University. Research Report 763. New Mexico State University: USDA Agricultural Experiment Station. Las Cruces, NM.: New Mexico State University, November 2008.

Corgan, Joe and others, Bulb Onion Culture and Management for Southern New Mexico, Circular 563, New Mexico State University Cooperative Extension Service, revised by Stephanie Walker and others. Las Cruces, NM.: New Mexico State University, 2009.


Chile Culture. Bulletin No. 67, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Albuquerque, NM: Albuquerque Morning Journal, 1908.

El Guzano de la Manzana. Press Bulletin 415, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. 1920.

Growing Denia Onion Seed. Bulletin No. 82, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Las Cruces, NM: Rio Grande Republican, 1912.

La cebolla, el oja, y la espinaca. Bulletin No. 115, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Las Cruces, NM: Rio Grande Republican, 1916.

Onion Culture. Bulletin No. 52, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1904.

___. *Orchard Notes*. Bulletin No. 39, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1899.

___. *Peach Experiments*. Bulletin No. 76. New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Santa Fe, NM: New Mexican Printing Company, 1911.

___. *The Effects of Spring Frosts on the Peach Crop, With Cultural notes on the Peach in New Mexico*. Bulletin No. 30, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Las Cruces, NM: Doña Ana County Republican, 1899.


___. *Preliminary Pecan Experiments*. Bulletin No. 145, New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station (State College, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1925).


Herrera, Esteban. *Historical Background of Pecan Plantings in the Western Region*, New Mexico State University College of Agriculture, Guide H-626 PH 1-110. Las Cruces, NM: New Mexico State University, 2000.

McBride, Robert E. *Doña Ana County in New Mexico: Containing the Fertile Mesilla Valley, Cradle of Irrigation in America, the Garden Spot of the Great Southwest where Returns from the Land are Generous and Sure*. Las Cruces NM: Bureau of Immigration of New Mexico, 1908.

Miller, Charles H. *The Irrigation Resources of New Mexico: An address delivered before the New Mexico Chautauqua Association, New Mexico Resources Day, August 5, 1911, Mountainair*. Santa Fe, NM: New Mexico Printing Company, 1911.


New Mexico Bureau of Immigration. *Doña Ana County, New Mexico: the Mesilla Valley, the Garden of New Mexico, Mineral Wealth in Picturesque Mountain Ranges, Cattle, Sheep and Goats by the Thousands, an Ideal Winter Climate*. Santa Fe, N.M.: New Mexican Printing Company, 1901.
New Mexico Bureau of Immigration. *Doña Ana County, New Mexico: the fertile Mesilla Valley, mineral wealth in the Organ, San Andreas and Black mountains, a magnificent range, ideal winter climate: The Garden Spot of New Mexico.* Santa Fe, NM: J.S. Duncan, Public Printer, 1904.


Vestal, George and Fabián García. *Report on Plums, New Mexico,* Bulletin No. 27, New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts – Agricultural Experiment Station. Mesilla Park, NM: New Mexico College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts, 1898.

**Secondary Sources**


