

**The Baca Ranches**  
Baca National Wildlife Refuge – South Central Colorado

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**Introduction**

The Baca Ranch, once known as the Crestone Estate, has both an exceptional history and one that reflects trends in regional and Colorado agriculture. The most outstanding feature is its continuity, retaining its size, agricultural use, and water rights for more than 150 years. It also contains an exceptional mix of ecosystems, combining irrigated hay meadows with dry pastures. But the factors influencing the development of ranching on the Baca Ranch are those that impacted ranchers across the state including demand for beef, access to markets, access to water, outside investment in ranching, and evolving agricultural practices.

**Development of the Ranching Industry in Colorado**

In 1858, William Green Russell found traces of gold at the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River, where Denver City was soon established. News of the discovery spread quickly, inspiring prospectors to rush to the Rockies. Denver City's placer deposits proved disappointing, and the search for gold soon extended west into the mountains, with discoveries in Gilpin County, Clear Creek County, and Park County. Denver City soon evolved from a mining camp to a transportation and supply center.

The development of the ranching industry in Colorado followed quickly on the heels of the mining industry. There was a high demand for meat in the mining camps. Some miners turned to ranching after their prospecting attempts were unsuccessful. Others saw the potential to make a profit in supplying prospectors. Early ranchers found Colorado to be ideal for stock

raising. Though much of the states' rugged and semi-arid landscape was unsuitable for farming, it could provide nutritious grazing for livestock. Much of the natural prairie grass was buffalo grass or grama grass. These short hardy grasses could withstand trampling and drought and provide winter forage even when dormant. Colorado's climate was generally mild enough that cattle could be left out on the range during the winter, though blizzards were always a threat. Publications promoting Colorado soon lauded the state's stock raising potential along with its mineral wealth. Colorado was celebrated as the land of free grass, with vast ranges of public, unclaimed lands available to any rancher who wanted to use them. The quality of the state's forage and hay was also praised. Open Range ranching was promoted as a relatively easy way to make a profit:

"Stock growing in Colorado has ever been a sure and remunerative avocation. It has grown in proportions until hundreds of thousands of cattle and sheep are shipped eastward or to the mountains annually. But little care or expense is incurred in this business. The expense of shepherds is small as they are not required in winter. At that season stock was usually allowed to roam at will, on the vast pastoral lands of the plains, and thrive and grow fat on the nutritious grasses that there abound" (Fossett 1876, 444).

Many of Colorado's settlers were drawn by its advertisement as a health destination. The health benefits of abundant sunshine, high altitude, and dry air were widely praised, especially for those suffering from respiratory ailments. These benefits were also believed to extend to the livestock bred and raised in Colorado, producing livestock with larger hearts and lungs and less disease.

The Open Range era in Colorado flourished from the 1860s until the early 1890s. Cowboys began trailing through the state in 1859, bringing herds from Texas to Colorado for fattening. The Goodnight-Loving Trail was developed, herding cattle across the plains of eastern Colorado and up to Cheyenne, Wyoming. Colorado ranches were also established to take advantage of the vast ranges. Early ranchers acquired land with reliable water sources by homesteading or purchase and could then use adjacent unclaimed lands for additional grazing land. Cattle were fed on green grass during the summer and dormant forage during the winter, with cowboys moving them between ranges, generally higher mountain ranges in the summer and the plains in the winter. On the lands of the public domain, it was not uncommon for cattle from various operations to mingle. To distinguish them, cattlemen used a system of brands in which a symbol specific to each ranch was burned onto the hides of that ranch's cattle. Brands were designed so that reading them was a specific skill: It was said that in the early days of the open range, cowboys who could neither read nor write could nevertheless read brands. In the spring, cowboys convened their herds and branded the steers and heifers that were no longer small enough to be identified with their mothers. Steers were also castrated at this time, making them easier to handle. Ranches became known by their brands.

The early cattle in Colorado were primarily Texas longhorns, and there was little concern for breeding or quality. Open range also resulted in over grazing as there was no range management or incentive for conserving rangelands that were open to anyone to use. In 1867,

ranchers formed the Colorado Stockgrower's Association to establish brand inspection and advocate for better range management. The cattle industry got a boost with the arrival of the railroad in Denver in 1870. Access to rail lines for shipping opened up new markets for ranchers, making ranching more profitable and convenient. During the 1880s, the cattle business became more established and corporate ranching was introduced. Ranchers also started fencing their land (utilizing barbed wire that was just becoming available) to protect their claims to land and water.

Ranching was a risky venture with blizzards, droughts, disease, thieves, and predators threatening livestock and unstable prices threatening profits. However, several outstanding individuals, dubbed cattle barons, found great success. John Wesley Iliff came to Colorado with the Gold Rush of 1859, opening a general store in Denver. He sold the store a couple years later, established a ranch on the South Platte River, and began building a cattle herd. Iliff's operation grew quickly, selling cattle to the government to supply army forts and to the railroad for construction crews. Iliff's ranch holding eventually grew to include a hundred miles of land along the South Platte River from Julesburg to Greeley. John Wesley Prowers first came to Colorado working as a freighter on the Santa Fe Trail. He started his cattle operation in 1862, importing cattle from Kansas. Prowers became a successful stock raiser and dealer, importing Hereford cattle to improve his herd's breeding. He eventually acquired more than forty miles of river frontage, controlling enough grazing land to support a herd of 10,000. The success of Iliff and Prowers inspired many to try ranching which likely included George Adams who developed the Baca Ranch. The Colorado ranching industry also began attracting East Coast and foreign investors. The Prairie Cattle Company was organized in Scotland in 1880, which established headquarters in Colorado, New Mexico, and Texas, holding more than five million acres.

Open Range ranching came to an end in the 1890s as the amount of available grazing land declined. There was increasing competition for grazing land, leading to overgrazing and overstocking. The depletion of pasturage led cattlemen to dump their livestock on the market, quickly depleting prices. Finally, the Panic of 1893 drove the price of beef down and drove the cost of producing it up. Ranchers were also in competition with homesteaders, who were claiming and fencing land previously used for grazing. The construction of new irrigation systems for farming also obstructed the movement of cattle.

The 1890s was an important decade for the development of Colorado's ranching industry as it transitioned from Open Range into more closely managed herds. Cowboys and cattle barons were replaced by stockmen and farmers. With the amount of open range decreasing, ranchers began enclosing cattle during the winter and providing supplementary feed. The trend was towards smaller herds and improved breeding. Longhorns were replaced by Herefords, Shorthorns, and Polled Angus. Herefords became the most popular range breed, praised for their hardiness and ability to mature and put on weight quickly. Some ranchers specialized with purebred herds that could be sold as breeding stock, while others just worked to improve the quality of their range stock through interbreeding.

Several types of cattle operations developed. The most common was cow-calf with the ranchers maintaining a permanent herd of cows to produce calves for later sale. The ranch herds

consisted mostly of adult female cows, their calves, and young female heifers that would produce calves when they reach breeding age. Calves were often sold when weaned, though some ranchers raised them longer. Other operations focused feeding rather than breeding. Some ranchers purchased calves and grazed them for a year or two before selling them on as feeders for further fattening. Others purchased feeders and finished them for slaughter. Several factors influenced the type of operation. The conditions for cow-calf operations were more favorable in southern and eastern Colorado where the temperatures are likely to be better when the calves are born and there is less likelihood of heavy snows. The size of the property and availability of grazing land either on the farm or nearby was also important, especially for cow-calf operations which generally primarily depend on grazing. The local availability of feed, either from hay meadows or nearby farms, could make feeding cattle more attractive.

In the early twentieth century, ranching increasingly emphasized effective range management. In 1906, the U.S. Forest Service began charging fees for grazing within the newly established National Forests in an effort to prevent overgrazing on federal lands. New extension programs studied grazing practices and published bulletins with recommendations to prevent the range and homesteaders later fenced their own holdings, not just their water sources, in order to keep their privately held grazing land to themselves. The second innovation, the windmill, allowed ranchers to access underground aquifers and fill stock ponds and tanks for watering livestock.

To offset the diminished access to and reduced viability of public lands, some of the more successful ranchers expanded their holdings by buying out failed homesteaders. But the massive (more than a million acres) ranches of the nineteenth century were mainly a thing of the past. Agricultural products were in high demand during World War I, but after the war there was a glut and prices collapsed, resulting in the sale and division of ranches. By the 1920s, the majority of beef produced in Colorado was actually produced by ranchers with no more than 150 head of cattle or farmers raising cattle in addition to crops.

The Taylor Grazing Act of 1934 created public grazing districts, allowing local ranchers to lease public lands by purchasing permits. The Taylor Grazing Act's regulations aimed to restore the depleted range by dictating grazing seasons and pasture rotation. It also stipulated that public grazing leases preferably should be given to ranchers who owned, homesteaded, or leased privately held land contiguous with the public land, thereby preserving public lands for use by local ranchers. Although some ranchers opposed the idea that the federal government could regulate their use of public lands, many western ranchers themselves were the strongest supporters of the Taylor Grazing Act. They knew that sustainable use depended on controlled access to the public domain; ranching had no future without stewardship of the land.

### **Ranching in Colorado's Mountain Parks**

Ranching thrived in Colorado's mountain parks. These high altitude basins consist of mostly treeless plains surrounding by forested mountains. Ranching developed in these areas in conjunction with mining; ranchers initially supplied mining camps and were later able to ship further when railroads were built to the mines. Though the parks were semi-arid, mountain streams provided water for irrigation. Irrigated meadows were an essential feature of the ranch

operations. Irrigation systems were generally simple, developed and constructed by ranchers. Water was diverted from streams into earthen canals via simple diversion structures and head gates. The earliest settlers had the advantage when it came to acquiring irrigation water since Colorado water law is based on "first in time, first in right." The first water user acquires a prioritized right to use a set amount of water and they can obtain that water before anyone with later water rights. In order to establish and maintain a water right, a water user had to demonstrate an intent to use the water, establish a physical diversion to carry water from the natural watercourse, and put the water to beneficial use.

Irrigated hay meadows furnished hay for winter feeding as well as grazing. Cattle grazed on the hay meadows in the spring. Branch canals carried the water to irrigation ditches and water was then spread onto meadows via flooding. Irrigation began after the cattle were moved to semi-arid pastures. Hay was harvested mid-summer, and cattle could be grazed on the stubble before being moved to winter pasture.

Cattle in Colorado generally do not need substantial or expensive structures, but they do need some shelter from wind, which can be very strong in the parks. In exposed areas, ranchers needed to construct some form of shelter, such as partial dugouts or loafing sheds. Windbreaks were also planted or constructed.

Ranch tasks included moving cattle between pastures to prevent overgrazing, providing hay to the cattle during the winter, maintaining fences and water sources, branding, and castrating. Though cattle did not need to be as closely watched as sheep, it was generally recommended to check on the herd every two to three days to identify and look after sick or injured cattle.

### **Sheep Raising**

Stock raising in Colorado was not limited to cattle; sheep were also a major industry. Before cattle were introduced from Texas in the era of open range ranching, Hispano settlers moving north from New Mexico onto Mexican grants brought flocks of churro sheep. Sheep operations could be very large, with herders handling 2000 to 3000 sheep. Sheep were also an essential part of the subsistence agriculture practiced in the San Luis Valley. Sheep ranching expanded quickly in Colorado's early decades. In 1868 there were around 300,000 sheep in the state; by 1886 there were two million sheep (Ubbelohde 2001, 173).

Though some ranchers raised both sheep and cattle, there was often tension between sheep and cattle ranchers. As homesteaders claimed lands that had been part of the public domain, competition increased for land. The New Mexican sheepherders began to encounter conflicts with Anglo-American cattle ranchers. In the early 1880s, many Hispano sheepherders were driven out of the state by Anglo cattlemen who saw sheep as agents of destruction on the land, and who saw Hispano sheepherders as somehow foreign, although at that time Hispanos established successful cattle operations and worked alongside Anglo cattlemen throughout the region. The sheep raisers' persistence, combined with steady markets and the compatibility of sheep with the native grasses on the range, kept sheep raising strong in the area. Sheep proved more likely to survive the extreme weather conditions than cattle, and the industry persisted even after the harsh winters of 1886 and 1887.

The sheep industry was hampered by the depression of wool prices in the late 1880s and early 1890s, due first to an economic downturn and later to the 1894 lifting of wool tariffs. After the turn of the twentieth century, the sheep industry—although still viable—experienced a long lull in growth. Nationally, the number of sheep dropped from a high of 54 million in 1884 to 37 million head in 1923. The industry bounced back, however, and an all-time high of 56 million head nationally was reached in 1942, in response to the United States military's demand for meat to feed the troops during World War II. Following the Second World War, however, a confluence of events led to the decline of the sheep industry and by 2007 the national sheep inventory was only 6.2 million. This loss has been attributed to many factors, among them shifting consumer trends and preferences, increased competition from foreign wool production, and changes in subsidy and incentive payment programs. Locally, many ranchers abandoned sheep because of difficulty finding herders.

### **The San Luis Valley**

Located in Southern Colorado, the San Luis Valley is a mountain park roughly sixty miles wide and a hundred miles long. The elevation in the park averages 7,500 feet high, with the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountain to the east rising more than 14,000 feet, the Sawatch Mountains lie to the west. The valley is a desert receiving less than eight inches of rain per year, though runoff from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains supports irrigation in the valley. Even railroad promotional brochures felt that potential settlers needed to be prepared for the sparse vegetation:

“The Eastern settler who reaches this place expecting to see a vast plain covered with green grass and blooming flowers will find himself disappointed. On the river and creek bottoms and in places along the foothills, the grasses do grow naturally and luxuriantly, furnishing nutritious food for stock the year round. But on the plains or prairies there is no grass to speak of, and the natural production is grease wood and chico—a kind of evergreen shrub growing from a few inches to three or four feet in height” (Denver and Rio Grande Railroad 1904, 21).

Saguache County, where the Baca Ranch is located, lies at the northern end of the valley. The county was created in 1866 and its early settlers were primarily prospectors and cattlemen. In 1871, Saguache County was described as the most sparsely settled county in the territory, though one likely to start attracting more attention:

“It is a fertile and finely watered region, and offers inducements for stock raisers and farmers, elsewhere unequalled. Its valleys are great natural meadows, covered with the richest vegetation, and its table lands afford the finest natural pasture lands in the world. The mountain scenery, hemming it in on three sides, is grand in the extreme” (Wallihan 1871, 58).

Nineteenth century settlements included the county seat of Saguache; the mining towns of Bonanza, Orient City, and Crestone; and Moffat, which served as a transportation and supply center. The mining efforts in the county made some profits, but never the celebrated

success of other regions of Colorado. Orient City was devoted to iron mining while other settlements were focused around gold and silver mining.

### **Hispano Heritage**

The San Luis Valley retains a strong Hispano heritage. Ethnicity is important to consider when describing the history of a region because it tells us much about the ways people create and use the resources at their disposal. As different groups encountered one another, they often incorporated ways of living from other cultures into their own, blending building methods, foodways, and clothing styles.

Southern Colorado has long been a borderland. It was part of Mexico until 1846, when the U.S. acquired it during the Mexican American War. The San Luis Valley was initially organized into the New Mexico Territory, but became part of the Colorado Territory when it was established in 1861. Hispanos from New Mexico were the valley's first settlers. In order to encourage settlement of its northern frontier the Mexican government offered large land grants to individuals who would promise to improve, develop, and defend the land. The patron, or principal land owner, then recruited groups of settlers. Soon nodes of New Mexican settlers moved into southern Colorado, establishing small village-like settlements known as "plazas," in which an extended family and other associated families occupied a series of rooms and dwellings around a central open area. Plaza residents farmed communally, employing a widely varied approach to making a living from the land that included raising sheep and farming melons, beans, pumpkins, and chilies. The Baca Grant, however, was not a typical land grant and was never settled under this system. The Baca Grant was awarded to settle a dispute over a grant awarded to Luis Baca in New Mexico. It was created from public lands in 1860.

Prior to the gold rush, the San Luis Valley had the largest non-Native American population in what would become the Colorado Territory. In 1870, approximately sixty percent of San Luis Valley residents were from New Mexico. The influence of the Hispano heritage can be seen in the architecture and culture of the San Luis Valley. Settlers brought traditional construction methods such as adobe. Developed in a similar climate, these methods were also well-suited to the San Luis Valley. Adobe construction techniques in the southwestern United States combined Native American (Pueblo) and Spanish traditions. Adobe is a natural building material made from a mix of sand, clay, water and some kind of fibrous or organic material, commonly straw or sticks. Wooden molds are used to create uniform adobe bricks. After shaping, the wet adobe is left in the sun for a couple weeks to dry and is then ready to use. The availability, durability, and warmth of adobe structures made adobe an attractive choice for settlers. If properly cared for with regular repair and re-plastering, adobe structures can stand for hundreds of years. Used as mortar for stone buildings, applied as stucco, or shaped into blocks and dried under the sun, adobe became a common building material throughout southern Colorado in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.

This heritage can be seen in several adobe buildings at the Baca Ranch headquarters. In 1881, Crofutt's Grip Sack Guide described the residents of Saguache County as about half Spanish-Mexicans who lived in adobe houses. The guide describes the Baca Ranch as a place "where sheep and cattle range at will, the care of which is the principal occupation of the few

settlers, most of whom are Spanish-Mexicans" (Crofutt 1881, 139).

### **Development of the San Luis Valley**

The potential of the San Luis Valley was debated in the early years of the Colorado Territory, with some believing that irrigation could make the desert productive while others remained skeptical. Despite the skepticism, the Valley soon drew the attention of land speculators and investors, such as William Gilpin who purchased the Sangre de Cristo land grant in 1863. Many hoped to find mineral riches but there was also increased agricultural development as the economy began to transition from subsistence agriculture to commercial agriculture. The many mining camps and new towns springing up across Colorado provided demanding markets for grain, meat, and wool. Agricultural settlement remained focused along waterways in the bottomlands. George Adams, who would later purchase the Baca Grant, came to Colorado in 1869. After trying prospecting unsuccessfully, he decided to homestead in the San Luis Valley. He claimed land on Rito Alto Creek (about four miles northeast of Crestone) around 1870. He began leasing the Baca Grant for grazing in 1871. During the early 1870s, the grant was the focus of real estate speculation, transferring between various property owners. Prospectors also started squatting on the grant and began mining operations. But the population was still sparse. In 1871, the Rocky Mountain Directory and Colorado Gazetteer described Saguache County:

"The population of Saguache, chiefly adventurous Americans, with their herds of cattle and flocks of sheep, numbers between 300 and 400. A few are engaged in cultivating vegetables and the cereals, and find ready market for their produce in the mining settlements along the upper Arkansas, etc. It is a beautiful county, and cannot fail to be densely populated at no distant day" (Wallihan 1871, 59).

The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad arrived in the valley in 1877. The railroad ran from Fort Garland to Alamosa on to Antonito and then branched to go south to New Mexico or west to Durango. The Denver and Rio Grande Railroad was first established by Colonel William Palmer, who completed a north-south line from Denver to Pueblo in 1872. In the nineteenth-century American West, the railroads were the primary agents of modernity, forever changing the ways the citizens of the new country lived. The relationship between railways and settlements was reciprocal: railroad companies fed the growth of existing settlements by bringing goods and services, but they also platted and named towns where previously there were none in order to serve their stations. Railroads also brought increased standardization of the built environment, making milled lumber and other building materials more readily available.

During the 1870s, Anglo-American settlement in the valley increased. The region was promoted for its healthy climate, grand scenery, and development potential. A combination of settlement patterns developed with Hispano plazas interspersed with railroad towns and real estate developments. New settlers homesteaded, bought state land or purchased from earlier settlers. The Hispano influence remained strongest in the southern San Luis Valley while the northern valley became more Anglicized. Commercial agriculture continued to expand, assisted by the new market connections offered by the railroad. The 1870s saw increased irrigation development and more commercial crops. Irrigation was promoted as a way to defy drought and have a good harvest guaranteed:



"Here is the beauty of irrigation farming. No fear of wet or dry weather. The farmer doesn't care for the weather, be it one way or the other. He has in his own control all the elements of growth; and though it may be somewhat more of trouble than a natural rainfall, yet he is always sure of returns if he knows his own business and attends to it properly" (Denver and Rio Grande Railroad 1904, 21).

Artesian wells were dug to access underground aquifers for irrigation. Promoters ignored the possibility of freezing weather or hail to destroy crops or that droughts could result in a lack of water in the streams used for irrigation and lower water tables. Hispano settlers increased the size of their sheep herds and Anglo-Americans introduced cattle herds. Dryland wheat farming was also attempted. Miners heading to the gold rush in the San Juan Mountains created a demand for food.

During the 1880s and 1890s, irrigated agriculture continued to expand, becoming key to both crop and livestock production in the valley. Wheat, barley and oats were the dominant food crops while irrigated hay was supplemented with sweet clover and alfalfa. By 1891, there were 74,400 acres under irrigation in Saguache County and 117,075 acres in pasture. There were more than 27,000 head of cattle, 16,000 sheep and 5,000 horses (Union Pacific Railroad 1891, 94). George Adams played an active role in developing the cattle industry in the region through his involvement in the American Hereford Association and Colorado Cattle Growers and tenure on the State Cattle Inspection and Roundup Board. At Adams death in 1904, the ranch herd consisted of 4,000 pure bred and mixed Herefords.

The Valley Line through Saguache County was completed in 1890, stimulating development and connecting Saguache County ranchers to wider markets. The Valley Line crossed Poncha Pass to Villa Grove and then ran south to Alamosa. The railroad stopped at Moffat, which within a few years was described as having "fine depot buildings, a large hotel and a number of mercantile houses" and serving as the "shipping point for stock and produce from the Crestone estate" (Hall 1895, 307).

The Crestone Branch, a 17 mile narrow gauge spur from the Valley Line to Cottonwood, was constructed in 1901 by the Rio Grande Sangre de Cristo Railroad for the D&RG. The primary shipments were copper and precious metals from the Cottonwood mine. The branch did not operate for long; by 1923 it was only running to Crestone and in 1929 the branch was abandoned. The Valley Line ceased operation in 1951. The rail lines and depots in the region generally did business until World War II, after which better roads and increased truck transport weakened the reciprocal relationship between small towns and their railroads.

The early twentieth century saw large scale irrigation development in Alamosa, southern Saguache County, eastern Rio Grande and central Conejos counties. Development patterns reflected the availability of water with denser settlement in the irrigated parts of the valley and sparse settlement in other areas. Adams sold stock in the ranch to the San Luis Valley Land and Mining Company (later the San Luis Valley Land and Cattle Company) in 1900. After Adams

death, the company purchased the remaining stock to take over the ranch and leased the land for both cattle and sheep grazing. The Baca Grant Development Company, a subsidiary, developed a scheme to subdivide and sell the ranch, creating a statewide controversy over what was perceived as false promotion.

In the 1930s, Alfred M. Collins, a major stockholder of the San Luis Valley Land and Cattle Company in moved to the ranch to take over operations. He focused on developing the purebred Hereford herd and further developed the ranch through the construction of additional irrigation ditches and artesian wells. The San Luis Valley fared better than much of Colorado during the 1930s, with its irrigated agriculture producing harvest while dryland crops in eastern Colorado failed. The Resettlement Administration moved some failed farmers from the plains to the San Luis Valley.

Surface flood irrigation was the primary method of distributing water to the field during the period from the 1890s to the early 1960s. In the 1960s, center pivot sprinkler systems the valley. In 1982, quinoa was successfully grown for the first time outside of South America and has been commercially grown since 1987. Today agriculture is concentrated around the towns of Alamosa, Monte Vista and Center. The crops grown in these fields were mainly potatoes and alfalfa with some lettuce and spinach as secondary crops. These main crops continue to be grown to this day. Ninety percent of the potatoes grown in Colorado are grown in the valley. It is the fourth largest potato growing region in the United States. Alfalfa hay is the second largest dollar producing crop, three cuttings a year are typical. Potatoes, lettuce and spinach are primarily produced for the national market. Alfalfa is grown for the dairy farms in New Mexico and Texas. Malt barley Moravian 14 is grown in the San Luis Valley and is the main supply for Coors beer. Less favored areas with a shorter growing season and less access to water are devoted to alfalfa and grazing. The cattle empires of the late 1800s have given way to smaller ranches and farms. Other enterprises include bee keeping for honey production, tilapia farming and free range bison. By 1950, the valley was served by the Denver Rio Grande Western Railroad, Frontier Airlines, several bus lines and a number of truck lines both scheduled and unscheduled. Transportation continues to play an important role in the valley, bringing in tourist dollars and shipping out the agricultural goods.

## Chronological History of the Baca Grant Ownership



### **Luis Maria Baca Grant No. 4**

The origin of the Baca land grant dates to approximately 1823 and was located in northern New Mexico encompassing the modern town of Las Vegas, New Mexico. Luis Maria Cabeza de Baca had applied for the grant, and the provincial deputation of Durango awarded him the land, in 1823. The Baca Grant was ratified to Luis María Baca and his 19 sons in 1825. In 1835, the same tract of land was awarded to Juan de Dios Maiese and 27 others. This caused a dispute when land grant claims were adjudicated under the terms of the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo after the U.S. took control of the area in 1846. The conflicting claim to the 496,447 acres was settled when the Baca heirs agreed to take an equivalent amount of land in five other parcels. Of the five parcels swapped for the New Mexico land, this 100,000 acre plot of land in the San Luis Valley of Colorado was the fourth and the only one in Colorado territory. Although some sources have the Baca family residing on the land, it appears the Baca family never lived there. Shortly after being awarded the grant, the land was deeded to their lawyer to compensate for back payment of fees. In early 1862, that lawyer, John S. Watts, agreed to sell it to Territorial Governor William Gilpin for the price of thirty cents an acre, to be paid in five annual installments.

### **Territorial Governor William Gilpin and the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad Investors**

Gilpin's interest in purchasing the Baca Grant and his ownership of a 1/6 share in the neighboring Sangre de Cristo land grant soon attracted the attention of Charles (or Carlos) Beaubien, who offered Gilpin the opportunity in late in 1862 to buy another half interest in the Sangre de Cristo Grant for about four cents an acre, considerably less than the agreed upon Baca price. Payment was to be complete by March 1863, according to the agreement to purchase. Foregoing further attempts to buy the Baca Grant, Gilpin had difficulty in raising even the cash required for the Sangre de Cristo. By late summer of 1863, after traveling from coast to coast in search of investors, Gilpin was able to close the deal. Gilpin eventually gained control of the entire Sangre de Cristo grant (Simmons 1999, 145-146). Watts continued to try and close

the Baca deal, offering up deeds in 1864 and 1867, but Gilpin would not complete payment claiming that the deed was defective.

In 1870, the Baca Grant was finally sold to investors in the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad (D&RG) lead by Alexander Hunt, former US Marshall, Territorial Governor, Judge and Territorial treasurer of Colorado Territory. J. H. Hutchinson purchased the grant for outstanding taxes in 1870, but Hunt redeemed the property later in the year and assigned it to David Moffat. In late 1870, David Moffat received the assignment of a Saguache County certificate of tax sale for the property for \$571.20 of unpaid taxes. He later assigned it to Wilson Waddingham, a land owner from New Mexico. Hunt, Moffat and Waddingham were all experienced real estate speculators, so this back and forth assignment must have served some greater purpose for the benefit of all of them.

### **George Adams – Millionaire Entrepreneur**

During the 1870s, the D&RG group leased the grant to local ranchers for running cattle. One of these men, George H. Adams, became manager of the estate. By the early 1870s, the grant was being taken over by squatters intent on mining, while small herds of cattle grazed the land. Of several squatters towns, Cottonwood and Duncan were two of the largest. Cottonwood was established in 1876, and irrigation ditches providing the town with a reliable source for water were dug. In 1877, Gilpin bought the grant from the financially strained D &RG investors now led by Waddingham; he renewed the old cattle lease with Adams but retained all mineral rights, allowing mining to continue and receiving royalties on all minerals extracted. He encouraged further mineral exploration. In 1883, Gilpin mortgaged the grant to Charles B. Kountze, a Denver banker, for \$50,000. In 1884, Gilpin borrowed an additional \$30,000 from him using the grant lands as collateral (Colwell 1959, 260).

George Adams had leased the grant for cattle ranching since 1871. He owned several other properties in the San Luis Valley, both singly and with partners. Adams was born in Milwaukee, Wisconsin in 1845. He served in the Army and was honorably discharged in 1865. Returning to Milwaukee, Adams became money receiving clerk for the United States Express Company, which, in 1867, sent him to Kansas as messenger between Kansas City and Fort Ellsworth, the terminus of the Kansas Pacific Railroad. In the spring of 1868 he returned to Milwaukee, where he was superintendent of the Goodrich Express Company until 1869, when he resigned to come to Colorado. The trip was made via Cheyenne to Denver and from there to California Gulch (now Leadville), where he engaged in prospecting for two months, before heading in December to the San Luis Valley. Back in Wisconsin in 1878, Adams married Addie J. Bertschy, of Appleton, Wisconsin. They had one child, Florence P.

When George Adams bought the Baca Grant for \$250,000 in 1885 from Gilpin, he apparently did not have the capitol to close the purchase on his own. He borrowed the \$250,000 from Quincy A. Shaw, a prominent Boston financier and copper mine investor. Adams promptly removed the numerous trespassers and the Baca mining boom abruptly ended. He later attempted his own mining operations with limited success (Simmons 1999, 185). The towns of Cottonwood and Duncan were inside the grant, and their citizens were squatters. Adams contended that he not only owned the land grazing rights, but mineral rights as well. A legal

battle over land and mineral rights ownership ended up in the courts and the ruling was in favor of Adams and Shaw. In 1887, Adams sold the grant to Shaw for \$100,000, and Shaw returned the grant to Adams via a quit claim deed in 1899. It is unclear exactly how much Shaw and Adams had invested in the property at the time of Adams subsequent sale of the property, but various accounts have him as owner or just as agent for Shaw.

In 1896, George Dimick and Charles Matheson leased the area near Cottonwood from Shaw and proceeded to develop the Independent Mine. This lease was terminated in 1899, but Dimick and Matheson refused to give up the mine and the issue went to court. It was settled in February of 1900 that Dimick and Matheson's lease was valid and they were allowed to continue. In 1900 the citizens of both Cottonwood and Duncan were evicted by U.S. Marshals. Home owners were compensated by the Baca Grant at \$125 for each structure and were subsequently allowed to buy back their homes for \$10 providing that they moved them off the grant. All of Cottonwood's and Duncan's buildings were either razed or moved except for the John Duncan cabin. It was converted for use by the ranch and is now located on U S Forest Service land (Jessen 1998).

Adams made his headquarters at the Home Ranch (Shellabarger 1972, 7). By 1890 the grant had become known as "Crestone Estate" (Simmons 1999, 238). Adams and Isaac Gotthelf, a local entrepreneur and cattle rancher with no known interest in the Baca grant, erected 140 miles of fencing in 1881. This was the first extensive use of barbed wire in the valley. The barbed wire was sourced from Fort Garland and hauled in by George Clark (Mayer 1938). By 1895, Adams had divided the interior into 8 sections, each of which most likely aligned with one of the cattle camps. (Hall 1895, 307). During the 1880s Adams extensively improved on the natural irrigation features found on the property and dug irrigation ditches, built sheds, corrals and branding chutes, and established eight cattle camps in addition to Home Ranch.

The Sheds, Willow Creek, Cottonwood, Deadman, January and Alpine camps all had families which lived at them at least seasonally according to Sisemore. Adams created 110 miles of irrigation canals and ditches for watering the hay meadows, which equaled 28,000 acres. He dug dozens of artesian wells. These items were called for in the lease which began in 1881 and gave him three years to conduct the improvements (*Colorado Weekly Chieftain*, 1878, 3).

Also a condition of the lease was the construction of a four room adobe house, outbuildings, corrals, granaries, barns and stables, and the planting of shade trees along the north property line (Colwell 1959, 257). Adams interbred his pure bred Hereford cattle with western range cattle to create a hardy, in-demand range animal and also raised purebred Herefords under the LC brand. With mining and ranching combined on the grant, this property became a major asset.

Adams moved to Denver around 1900. According to his obituary, published in one of the Denver papers June 15, 1904, George H. Adams was a millionaire cattleman and owner of the Adams hotel in Denver Colorado.

"A prominent Denver citizen, Mr. Adams' business career consisted of one of the most remarkable instances of the adaptation of Colorado the cattle industry. Embarking in business as a stock-raiser in 1869, he bought the two first thoroughbred Shorthorn bulls ever in the San Luis Valley. He has been a pioneer in the introduction of Herefords, which exclusively stocked his ranch from 1878." (Web Site: Find A Grave)

The obituary included a detailed description of Adams ranch, stating that it:

"...covered more than four townships of land, embraced twelve and one-half miles and in extent comprised one hundred thousand acres, watered by eleven streams and lakes, and bordering on the western slope of the Sangre de Cristo Range. The entire tract is fenced in pastures with eighty miles of substantial fencing, while one hundred and forty miles of ditches furnish water for the irrigation of hay and the range. The herd consisted of four thousand head of pure-bred and high-grade Hereford cattle in 1904. From the ranch, cattle are sold and shipped to Old Mexico, Arizona, Texas, Oregon, Montana, Wyoming, New Mexico, Idaho, Kansas and Nebraska for breeding purposes." (IBID)

The obituary also included a long list of achievements and praise for Adams' successes:

"A pioneer in the San Luis Valley, he homesteaded one hundred and sixty acres on Rio (or Rito) Alto Creek and embarked in the stock business. In 1871 he entered the employ of a cattle company as foreman on Baca Grant No. 4, and later became proprietor. In 1878 he brought to his place eighty full-bred Hereford bulls and devoted his attention to the raising of pure-bred and high-grade Herefords. He was a director in the American Hereford Association, was a member of the Colorado Cattle Growers' and National Stock Breeders' Associations, and, under appointment by Governor Pitkin, served for eight years as a member of the State Cattle Inspection and Roundup Boards. In April, 1895, Governor McIntire appointed him president of the board of trustees of the State Soldiers' and Sailors' Home, to serve for six years. In Saguache County he held the office of county clerk for one term and was also justice of the peace and sheriff of the county. By service upon the school board he advanced the educational interests of his community." (IBID)

His place in the history of cattle ranching in Colorado seems secure:

"There have been so many successful cattlemen in Colorado that it may not be considered a more than ordinary statement to speak of Mr. Adams as one of the most successful, as he is also one of the most extensive. But when we consider that he came to the state with comparatively little capital and with no experience in the cattle business, his present position is remarkable. By dint of industry, executive ability and determination, he has risen to rank among the foremost cattle breeders of the state and may appropriately be termed the "Hereford king"

of the west." (IBID)

### **San Luis Valley Land and Mining Company Era**

Adams' exploration in to the mineral discoveries, in addition to the cattle, enhanced the value of the grant enough that he incorporated the grant to cash in on this potential. In 1900, Adams sold 40 percent of the stock in the property to the San Luis Valley Land and Mining Company, (which changed its name to the San Luis Valley Land and Cattle Company (SLVLC) in 1922). It was a subsidiary of the United Gas Improvement Company of Philadelphia, PA. This purchase was negotiated by Shaw. It appears that their interest was primarily in the mineral rights, and Adams continued his interest in the cattle ranching aspects of the grant. Adams and Shaw subsequently attempted to lease a large portion of the mining development rights, giving preference to those who had previously spent money mining the area (Aspen Weekly Times 1901, 4). In 1901, the Rio Grande Sangre de Cristo Railroad constructed a train spur from Moffat to Crestone to facilitate this mining exploration. It is unknown how many of these leases were acted upon.

After Adams' death in 1904, SLVLC purchased the remainder of the property from his wife for the sum of \$1,400,000, although some sources attribute this purchase to the 1900 transaction (Colwell 1959, 261). The SLVLC leased the ranchland to Millet Rhodes & Sloan (1905-1908), Tomkins (variously Thompkins) Cattle Corp. (1908-1916) and Yates & McClain (exact dates unknown) for running cattle. In 1909 Jay. B. Lippincott and Joseph Harrison acquired a controlling interest in SLVLC and developed a subsidiary company by the name of the Baca Grant Development Company and attempted to subdivide the ownership of the ranch into 9,200 contract holders distributed via land auction. These contract holders had the choice to purchase irrigated farm or fruit land, grazing land or timber and mineral land, and for each tract of land purchased, received additional town sites. The land contracts were to be sold for \$249, \$10 down and \$10 a month for 23 months. The whole undertaking was highly controversial and elicited editorials across the state. Critics accused the developers of over-selling the potential of the land, especially with regards to orchards and farming. The land auction never came to pass (Colwell 1959, 270).

The mineral land of the grant extends along the Sangre de Cristo range for 12 miles. The largest mine was the Independent mine, yielding more than \$300,000 in ore by 1908, and in 1908 there were 30 developed and partially developed mining claims in the grant. Placer mining took place for free gold along the south east portion of the grant. Ore ranged in quality greatly and included gold, copper, iron and other base metals. Timber and water needed for successful mining was also found in great abundance. Unfortunately, the cost of extraction was high and refining and smelting were distant and expensive, so the mining attempts were less than successful, and those that produced, did not do so for long.

### **General Managers of the Grant**

During this time, while the focus was on mineral extraction, the remainder of the grant was leased to local cattlemen to run cattle (Clason May Co. 1908). P. M. McGeorge was the general manager from 1900 to 1905 after George Adams moved to Denver. He resigned in 1905 and

Addie Adams, widow of George Adams, was appointed general manger of the grant from 1905 until around 1909, although she was managing for SLVLC, it is unclear why she returned to the ranch during this time. It is possible that George Adams had retained a partial share in the ranch, but records are unclear. B. F. Tipton managed the ranch for the stockholders of SLVLC, the majority of whom still lived in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, from 1910 until his death in 1928. His son, Harry Tipton, managed the grant from that time until 1934. B. F. Tipton's older son, Royce, was the chief engineer for SLVLC from 1919 to 1922 (Web Site: University of Colorado). The Tipton family ran sheep on the ranch during the summer in the rough part of the grant not used by the cattle (Mayer 1938, 8). The sheep were only on the property for several years, they were closed out to make room for the growth of the cattle herds. From 1934 until 1936, the manager of the ranch was Tom Watson. In 1936 Oscar Coleman became the manager. He was followed by Walter Oldland in 1940 and A.C. "Red" Allen in 1942.

### **Major Alfred M. Collins**

In 1930, Major Alfred M. Collins became an on- site presence and moved into the President's house at Home Ranch. Born in 1876, Collins was a major stockholder in SLVLC due to an inheritance from his Father and was a big game hunter, explorer, polo player and horse enthusiast. Upon visiting the Grant in 1929, Collins decided to find his fortune there and returned to Philadelphia to close out his business there. He was fifty-four years old. He had no training in management of a western cattle ranch.

He improved the land over the next ten years and by 1940, Hereford bulls from his herds were increasingly in demand. He oversaw the construction of 150 more miles of irrigation ditches and head gates, dug 600 to 700 foot deep artesian wells, increased the amount and quality of the grass in the hay meadows, and bred for the efficiency of the cattle. He must have invested heavily in the Cattle Headquarters complex, during his time it became known as Pure Bred Place. In 1945, one of the largest Hereford and Hereford cross cattle auctions in the country was held in the auction barn at Pure Bred Place. Pure Bred Place is specifically important to the development of the Hereford breed in the west.

According to the Horned Hereford History on the American Hereford Inc. magazine's website, in the late 1870s the Herefords started to appear in the larger commercial herds as the cattle industry moved west with the settling of the western part of the nation. Previous to this time, mixed herds of cattle of all descriptions were brought from Mexico and the southwestern herds, in large cattle drives. Later the Shorthorn breed moved into the West and was crossed on the Longhorn and other "Mongrel" breeds. The Baca Grant had both of these types, with the pure bred registered herd of particular prominence.

The Baca pure bred Hereford cattle were used for breeding, sales and show. The Royal Domino line was developed here and prized throughout the nation for breeding stock. The world record Hereford sale was held in the auction barn in 1945. According to the San Antonio Express of September 27, 1945, Feme L. Pearson paid for Baca Duke 5th, a world record price for a 5-months old calf at the Baca Grant ranch Hereford sale. The Morning Avalanche on September 26, 1945 carried a similar article:



"A world record price for a five month calf was reported today as sales neared the million dollar mark in a mammoth sale of registered Hereford live stock on the Baca Grant ranch. Mrs. Feme L Pearson of Indianola, Iowa paid for Baca Duke 5th a price that Forrest Bassford editor of the Denver newspaper said was high for a calf of that age. The animal is the son of Baca R Domino which earlier in the day had gone over the auction block for top price in the sale The buyer was Albert Noe of the Farms of Pulaski, Tenn. Buyers from 15 states and Canada swarmed the ranch which sprawls across the floor of the San Luis valley and reaches an elevation of 14,000 feet."

In 1949, Alfred Collins was named "Cattlemen of the Year" by Record Stockman and he had created one of the finest ranches in the United States. He retired at 74 years of age and died the next year. In early 1950, SLVLC advertised that the herd was headquartered in "...a beautiful, modern setup of barns, sheds, corrals and pastures just a short distance up the road from the main entrance to Baca Grant. It is the central point of interest for Hereford breeders, large and small, thruout (sic) the nation. Almost any day you will find some breeder or several registered Hereford men from different parts of the country visiting the Baca Grant registered Hereford headquarters" (Bassford 1950). Thus, Pure Bred Place may have been more prominent to many of the cattle men than the Home Ranch.

In 1950, the ranch was sold to Newhall Land and Farming Company of Arizona and California, primarily a land development company, most known for the development of the town of Valencia in California. Newhall Company paid \$1,000,000 for the land and \$750,000 for the commercial herd and continued to run cattle on the ranch. The Pure Bred Hereford cattle herds were sold following Collins' death in 1951 and set a world record for a cattle dispersal sale.

### **Arizona-Colorado Land and Cattle Company and beyond**

In 1962, the Arizona-Colorado Land and Cattle Company (AZL) acquired the Baca Grant from Newhall. They continued to raise cattle and were best known for the breeding of French Limousin Cattle. The Baca Grant No. 4 is the only one of the five original Grants to have remained intact for over 100 years. AZL formed the Baca Grande Corporation (BGC) in 1971 and began to subdivide the ranch to create The Baca Grande, a recreation and leisure living community. This was the first time in the history of the property that all 100,000 acres were not retained by the same land owner. Land was sold in phases and north of County Road T a commercial strip was developed. BGC installed underground utilities and built roads to service approximately 10,000 lots. Sales were slow and by 1979, the developer considered the property a liability. AZL at one time was the largest integrated cattle/feeding/land company in the US. In 1979, the principal shareholder, Canadian oilman Maurice Strong and his fiancée Hanne Marstrand, visited the property and decided to create a world spiritual center there by granting pieces of land to various spiritual organizations. Strong also created a new company, American Water Development Inc. (AWDI). He intended to pipe water from the aquifer under Baca to the Front Range, but environmental organizations protested and the plan was abandoned.

Since the 1980s, members of The Nature Conservancy had been interested in the Baca Grant. The Baca Grant shares very similar qualities to the surrounding lands that are part of the Great

Sand Dunes National Monument. 70 species of plants and animals make their sole home in the ecosystem that defines the Great Sand Dunes National Monument and the lands of the Baca Ranch (Seelye 2002, A23). Due to the environmental value of the land of the Baca Ranch, The Nature Conservancy, in tandem with residents of the San Luis Valley, was responsible for challenging the AWDI's right to relocate the water in the aquifer beneath the ranch. In 1994 the Supreme Court forced AWDI to relinquish its water rights to the Baca aquifer.

The Cabeza de Vaca Land & Cattle Company LLC (CdV), an operation controlled by local entrepreneur Gary Boyce, purchased the ranch from AWDI. The ranch was managed independently as The Baca Ranch and in 1998 that portion of the Grant was sold to Gary Boyce. (Web Site: The Baca Grande Property Owners Association). CdV reassembled the Baca Grant to the greatest extent possible. Gary Boyce also explored ways of capitalizing on the water resource upon which the Baca Grant sits, but was unable to put together a plan. CdV financed a state-wide ballot initiative that would overturn the precedent set by the Supreme Court's decision. Over one million dollars were spent on attempting to sway the general populace to vote to allow CdV's access to the water under Baca Ranch. The ballot tally was 3-1 against the measure (Web Site: Responsible Endowments Coalition).

### **The Baca National Wildlife Refuge**

Upon the failure of CdV's attempt to receive rights to the water in the aquifer, Vaca Partners LLC sold the land to the Nature Conservancy. The Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service bought the majority of the Baca Grant that wasn't developed and transferred nearly all of that into the control of the Great Sand Dunes National Park, the Rio Grande National Forest and the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. Congress authorized this land acquisition in 2000, but the land transfer was not completed until 2003. The Refuge has been closed to the public since then. The Fish and Wildlife Service is in the middle of a four-year process of adopting a long-term "comprehensive conservation plan" for the three San Luis Valley refuges. The Baca Refuge will not be fully accessible until this management plan, which will replace the interim management plan currently in place, is complete in early 2015. The ranch headquarters and some of the environment around it may be accessible when a planned visitor center is opened in late 2013. The USFWS continues to allow local ranchers limited access to grazing and haying operations on the ranch as a part of this management plan (Web Site: U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

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