

THE EARLY CULTURAL HISTORY SAN LUIS VALLEY – SOUTH CENTRAL COLORADO

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On the hottest days it is cool in the shade, and on the very coldest days it is comfortable in the sunshine.

Geologist C.E. Siebenthal, describing the San Luis Valley in 1910



Introduction

Humans have inhabited the San Luis Valley for over 12,000 years. Their uses of the land reflect both the traditions of those who moved to the Valley and local adaptations. The following summary of the prehistory and history of the Valley provides an overview of some of the major themes and events that illustrate the human interaction with the land. There is an abundance of prehistoric evidence, early historical accounts, records and photographs, and local histories for the Valley. This synopsis provides only a glimpse into the resources and information available with an emphasis on environmental references.

Prehistory



Paleoindian Stage

Current archaeological evidence indicates that the earliest humans, called the Paleoindians, migrated to the region near the close of the last Ice Age approximately 12,000 years ago. These people had a

highly mobile lifestyle that depended on the hunting of large now-extinct mammals, including mammoths and the huge ancient bison (*Bison antiquus*). The hallmark of most Paleoindian sites are the beautiful but deadly spear points that were launched with the aid of a simple yet expertly engineered spear-thrower called an atlatl. These projectile points are generally recovered as isolated occurrences or in association with animal kills, butchering sites or small temporary camps. Although the timing of this stage varies throughout the region and is constantly being refined as additional data becomes available, generally speaking the stage lasted until about 7500 years ago.

Information from the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHp) indicates that 62 Paleoindian resources have been identified in the Valley. These are often located near wetlands and along the shorelines of ancient lakes reflecting the use of abundant floral and faunal resources available in these locations. Several Paleoindian sites in the Valley and surrounding mountains have been excavated including the high altitude Black Mountain Site (5HN55) located at 10,000 feet in the San Juan Mountains south of Lake City. This campsite dates to approximately 10,000 – 7,000 years ago and yielded a variety of stone tools suggesting animal procurement and processing (Jodry 1999a:45).

Several Paleoindian sites on the Valley floor have been excavated and provide an extensive record of the early occupations. Three of these sites, the Cattle Guard site (5AI101), the Linger site (5AL91), and Zapata site (5AL90) are all located just south of Great Sand Dunes National Monument and Preserve and represent camps with an abundance of bison bone and associated stone tools (Cassells 1997:75; Jodry 1999a:64-84). The Reddin site (5SH77) near the town of Hooper yielded nearly 500 Paleoindian artifacts suggesting a variety of activities and uses (Cassells 1997:75-76; Jodry 1999a: 76-78).

Climatic fluctuations during the Holocene Epoch (starting about 12,000 years ago and continuing to the present) are often reflected in the archaeological record. Pollen remains, faunal assemblages, and geomorphological deposits suggest periods of significant and rather abrupt vegetation changes and variations in the amount of moisture (Jodry 1999b:12-26; Martorano 1999a:27-30). Bison remains associated with archaeological sites on the Southern Plains also indicate oscillations in bison numbers in response to climatic conditions (Creel et al. 1990). Although additional research is needed and our ability to recover and interpret the prehistoric record is continually improving, these preliminary studies are an intriguing look into long-term climatic change, the evidence and the consequences.

Archaic Stage

There was a gradual but definite shift in the pattern of human use of the region beginning about 7500 years ago that continued until approximately 1500 years ago. The changes were the result of a combination of regional climatic fluctuations and an increasing population, coupled with technological innovation and regional influences. Although this stage is better represented in the archaeological record than the preceding Paleoindian stage, the identification and interpretation of the remains continues to be expanded and refined. Evidence of a greater diversity of tools and the use of a larger variety of plants and animals is found on many sites.

There have been 618 Archaic Stage resources recorded in the Colorado portion of the study area. As with the earlier inhabitants, the Archaic peoples made extensive use of the Valley's wetland resources and also occupied the rockshelters and several high altitude locations found in the surrounding mountains. When speaking of Archaic sites in the northeastern portion of the Valley Hoefler states: "Most of the Closed Basin archaeological sites are open camps containing debitage and fire-cracked rock scatters, approximately half of which contain ground stone implements such as metate

fragments or manos. Many of these sites are located around seasonal wetland marshes and lakes" (Hoefler 1999:121).

The use of the atlatl with spear points continues and basketry, cloth, and cordage come into use. Although still very mobile, the population increasingly makes short-term use of small groupings of structures with storage features. Hunting blinds and other rock structures are fairly common although often difficult to interpret. Archaic Stage rock art is scattered throughout the region and the influences of surround regions, particularly the Plains and the Great Basin, is identifiable at several sites.

Late Prehistoric Stage

Beginning approximately 1500 years ago several innovations greatly influenced life in the Valley (Martorano 1999b:129-130). Although these changes were adapted at different rates and degrees throughout the area, the advent of pottery and the bow and arrow, coupled with a larger and more sedentary population defines the period until approximately 600 years ago. Early archaeological research in the Valley identified numerous regional influences, with several sites exhibiting pueblo-inspired attributes (Renaud 1942). In 1694 Don Diego de Vargas documented his visit to the Valley, thus providing an early historical written account and ushering in the historic period.

The 442 Late Prehistoric resources in the OAHP database are listed under a variety of designations for this stage but all date to about the same time period. The distribution of Late Prehistoric sites in the Valley reinforces the trend of intensive use of wetland habitats (Martorano 1999b:130). This is not surprising as the available resources – both floral and faunal – would continue to be abundant in these areas. Site types include camps, stone tool scatters, rock art, rock alignments and enclosures, and quarries where the lithic material for stone tools was collected.

Protohistoric Stage

By the late 1600s Spanish incursions into the Valley were beginning to affect the lives of the native populations. The Utes, who, based on archaeological evidence, came to the Valley sometime after A.D. 1100 (Reed 1994) and were the most prevalent occupants of the Valley, quickly acquired horses and other trade items. Although numerous other Native American groups probably visited or traveled through the Valley, the Comanche, Apache, Navajo, Arapaho, Cheyenne and several northern Pueblos also had a significant if not sustained presence (Martorano 1999c:138).

Sites from this stage, of which there are 59 in the OAHP files, include the traditional stone tools and ceramics mixed with utilized and/or flaked glass, trade beads, and metal projectile points. Wickiups (conical timbered structures) and trees with peeled bark indicating the harvesting of the edible cambium layer, are found as is rock art with motifs and depictions of post-contact goods.



Early History



The Historic period for the Valley begins with the reoccurring contact of the Native Peoples with people of European decent and ends in the mid twentieth Century. This interaction generally followed many years of occasional contact – often for the exchange of trade goods. The narrative below briefly summarizes some of the major historic influences, patterns, and themes in the region.

Early Exploration and Trade

“...I take and seize one, two, and three times, one, two, and three times, one, two, and three times, and all those which I can and ought, the Royal tenancy and possession, actual, civil, and criminal, at this aforesaid River of the North, without excepting anything and without any limitation, with the meadows, glens, and their pastures and watering places. And I take this aforesaid possession, and I seize upon it, in the voice and name of the other lands, towns, cities, villas, castles, and strong houses and dwellings, which are now founded in the said kingdoms and provinces of New Mexico, and those neighboring to them, and shall in future time be founded in them, with their mountains, glens, watering places, and all its Indian natives...”

Capitán Gaspar Pérez de Villagrá in *La Historia de la Nuevo Mexico, 1610*

With these bold words in 1598, Spanish explorer and newly appointed Governor of New Mexico Don Juan de Onate claimed for Spain all lands, structures, and people along the Rio Grande – including the San Luis Valley – forever. This followed several years of sporadic Spanish incursions into northern New Mexico and southern Colorado and ushered in several decades of trade, conflict and settlement. Many traveled along the Northern Branch of the Spanish Trail which had both western and eastern routes through the Valley. Although the Spanish relinquished ownership of the Valley in 1821 their influence survives as a vital part of the landscape and people today.

There are numerous explorers and settlers who left a legacy of journals, maps, and other accounts of their time in the San Luis Valley. The examples summarized below provide a glimpse into the types of information and insight available in these early accounts. Several other documents are available and offer a wide variety of historic and environmental information.

Don Diego de Vargas: 1694

The 1694 journal of Don Diego de Vargas survives as the earliest written account of the San Luis Valley. The journal is a wealth of information concerning the native peoples, topography and environment (Colville 1995). After leaving Santa Fe, De Vargas followed the North Branch of the Spanish Tail northward, traveling east of the Rio Grande and entering the Valley just southeast of Ute Mountain. From there he continued north, crossing what would become the New Mexico/Colorado state line and paralleling the western side of San Pedro Mesa before heading west along Culebra

Creek. Reaching the Rio Grande he turned south and crossed the river about five miles south of the confluence. His return trip to Santa Fe took him along the Rio San Antonito on the west side of the Rio Grande, exiting the Valley on the west side of San Antonio Mountain (Colville 1995:Map 2).

His six days in the Valley included contact, trade and occasional skirmishes with the Yutas (Utes), confrontations with Taos Puebloans, large herds of bison, and some "very large deer". This reference is the earliest known historical account of bison in the Valley (Colville 1995:211) – the last being a brief mention of buffalo by Juan Bautista Silva along the Rio San Antonio south of present day Antonito in the Spring of 1859 (Kessler 1998:322). During their travels, the use of sign language and smoke signals for communication is well documented, as is the need to be near water during the mid-summer travels.

Juan Bautista de Anza: 1779

Eighty-five years later in 1779 Juan Bautista de Anza, the Governor and Military Commander of New Mexico, left Santa Fe and headed north to quell the Comanche raids that were devastating Spanish settlements in the region. Traveling by night to avoid detection, de Anza followed the North Branch of the Spanish trail along the eastern foothills of the San Juan Mountains, through Poncha Pass and then headed east to the plains near Pike's Peak. From there he headed south along the foothills, through the areas that would become Colorado Springs and Pueblo, conducting several successful battles with the Comanche. He concluded his campaign by crossing back into the Valley at Sangre de Cristo Pass (La Veta Pass) and taking the eastern route of the North Branch of the Spanish trail back to Santa Fe (Kessler 1998: 49-63). He initially entered the Valley on August 19, 1779 and by September 4 of that year he re-entered the Valley near Fort Garland on his return trip to Santa Fe.

Notable features of the de Anza journal include the advantageous yet temporary alliance of de Anza's men with the Utes and Apaches to combat a mutual enemy: the Comanche. As he traveled along the west side of the Valley de Anza refers to the San Juan Mountains by their early Spanish name: Sierra de la Grulla, or Mountains of the Cranes. And, in an interesting meteorological observation, de Anza states on August 24 that: "From the beginning of the march we suffered from bitter cold" – this during a month that now has an average daytime high temperature in the upper 70s.

Zebulon Montgomery Pike: 1807

Unlike the earlier Spanish explorers, Captain Zebulon Montgomery Pike entered the San Luis Valley from the east, traveling west from St. Louis, across Missouri, Kansas, and the plains of Colorado. Pike's mission was to map and describe the southern portions of the newly acquired Louisiana Purchase. On January 27, 1807 he and most of his men (five were left along the trail – unable to walk on their frozen feet) crossed the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and entered the Valley near the Great Sand Dunes (Carter 1978; Hart and Hulbert 2006; Ubbelohde et al. 2001:21-22). He built a simple stockade near where the current town of Sanford is located and stayed there until February 26th when Spanish officials took him prisoner and escorted him down to Santa Fe because "...it was necessary his Excellency should receive an explanation of my business on his frontier ..." (Zebulon Pike, Thursday, February 26, 1807).

Although Pike's journal in the days preceding the ascent into the Valley often mentions seeing "a gang of buffalo", including in the Wet Valley, there is no mention of buffalo after he enters the Valley. In contrast, deer are often mentioned in the Valley and goose was a part of at least one meal. Pike grew fond of the Valley and concluded that "... it was at the same time one of the most sublime and beautiful prospects ever presented to the eyes of man" (Zebulon Pike, Thursday, February 5, 1807).

Jacob Fowler:1821-1822

The 1821-1822 journal of Jacob Fowler, which the New York Times referred to as “quaint and interesting” (The New York Times, 1898), is a wealth of information concerning the environment and the interactions between the various peoples who occupied the Valley (Coues 1965). The Times further describes the journal – just published by noted ornithologist Elliott Coues – as “...a notable contribution to our knowledge of early adventure and pioneering in the Great West. His style is straightforward and his wonderful power of observation has made the narrative very attractive”.

Fowler was a fur trader who left Fort Smith, Arkansas in September of 1821 and entered the Valley via La Veta Pass on February 4, 1822. For the next three months he traveled between Taos and the central portion of the Valley going as far north as near where Fort Garland would be later established. Many animals are noted in the Valley including beaver, elk, deer, bear, caberey (antelope), otter, big horned sheep, wild horses, geese, ducks, and a wolf. Although great herds of “buffelaw” were noted as the party crossed the Plains, and as far west as the Wet Valley, there is no mention of them once they reach the Valley. As with the references to animals, the descriptions of plants, particularly the distribution (or lack) of cottonwoods and willows along specific creeks, is frequent and often detailed. These descriptions are mixed with wonderful accounts of life in the numerous small Spanish settlements that dotted the landscape and interactions with the native peoples.

Fowler recorded an exceptionally astute observation while crossing the southern portion of the Valley on February 18, 1822:

I Have no doubt but the River from the Head of those Rocks up for about one Hundred miles has once been a lake of about forty to fifty miles Wide and about two Hundred feet deep – and that the running and dashing of the Watter Has Woren a Way the Rocks So as to form the present Chanel.

With this Robert Fowler had speculated about some of the complex geological processes that formed the Valley – processes that were studied and confirmed a hundred years later.

Numerous other explorer and settlers visited the Valley and left behind journals of varying detail (Hart and Hulbery 2006; Kessler 1998, Preuss 1958; Richmond 1990, Sanchez 1997). Among these are:

- George Frederick Ruxton, 1846
- John C. Fremont, 1848-1849
- Charles Preuss, 1848-1849 (traveling with Fremont)
- Gwinn Harris Heap, 1853
- John Williams Gunnison, 1853
- John Heinrich Schiel, 1853 (traveling with Gunnison)
- Randolph Barnes Marcy, 1858
- William Wing Loring, 1858
- Juan Bautista Silva, 1859

Political Boundaries, Land Grants and Public Lands

The San Luis Valley has endured many changes in governance over the last 300 years. Following nearly 12,000 years of sovereignty by various Native Americans, the control (or at least the declared control) and political boundaries of the region shifted continually until Colorado and New Mexico obtained statehood. The brief timeline below summarizes some of these changes in “ownership” of the San Luis Valley:

- 1598 Don Juan de Onate claims the San Luis Valley and surrounding areas for Spain.
- 1763 The Treaty of Paris at the end of the French and Indian War divides much of the North American interior between Spain and France. The San Luis Valley is considered Spanish territory.
- 1803 The Louisiana Purchase is negotiated between the United States and France but the western boundaries are not clarified and remain ambiguous.
- 1819 The U.S. negotiates the Adams-Onis Treaty with Spain to clarify the boundaries of the Louisiana Purchase. The San Luis Valley remains part of Spain’s New Mexico Territory.
- 1821 Mexican War of Independence (1810-1821). The Valley becomes a part of the new Nation of Mexico.
- 1836 The Republic of Texas achieves independence from Mexico. Texas claims lands in the Valley east and north of the Rio Grande. Mexico does not recognize the Republic, disputes this boundary, and continues to claim the entire Valley.
- 1837 U.S. recognized the Republic of Texas Republic, including the San Luis Valley.
- 1845 U.S. annexes Texas, including the San Luis Valley, and Texas achieves statehood
- 1848 Mexican Cession – following the Mexican-American War (1846-1848), the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo establishes the present Mexico – United States border except for the later 1853 Gadsden Purchase (southern Arizona and southern New Mexico).
- 1850 Amid much controversy over the admittance of new states as Free vs. Slave, and as a result of the Compromise of 1850, Texas surrenders its claim to New Mexico and the New Mexico Territory, including the San Luis Valley generally south of the Rio Grande (38th parallel), is established.
- 1854 Kansas Territory, which includes the northern part of the San Luis Valley (above the 38th parallel) is established out of previously unorganized lands of the Louisiana Purchases
- 1861 Colorado Territory is created by the Colorado Organic Act with the same boundaries that would later become the State of Colorado.
- 1876 Colorado becomes a state.
- 1912 New Mexico becomes a state.

Numerous Mexican land grants were issued in the Valley as a direct result of the political turmoil noted above and the desire for Mexico City to maintain control over the distant northern borderlands of their newly independent nation. These land grants were intended to encourage Mexican settlement in the borderlands thereby dissuading any thoughts of Texas independence and discouraging encroachment by American fur traders.

The first grants consisted of numerous small parcels along the Conejos River in Colorado in 1833 (Athearn 1985:49; Simmons 1999:43). These small grants were ineffective in establishing permanent settlement but the much larger 1842 Conejos Grant proved to have more success in persuading the founding of farms and towns. The grant covered over 2.5 million acres and included all of what would become the counties of Conejos and Rio Grande with parts of the counties of Mineral, Saguache and Alamosa. As with other Mexican land grants in the Valley, the grants were considered invalid following the Mexican-American War. The Court of Private Land Claims in 1900 ruled against the grantees and negated the claim (Colorado State Archives 2001).

The Sangre de Cristo grant included all of what is now Costilla County and extended a short distance into the current state of New Mexico. The grant consisted of one million acres and was originally awarded to two Mexican nationals in 1844 but following their deaths during the Pueblo Revolt of 1847 was sold to Charles (Carlos) Beaubien. Unlike the Conejos Grant, Beaubien's claim to the land was upheld by the courts in 1860. The land was later sold to William Gilpin (Colorado's first territorial governor) in 1864. Large tracks of the grant have been sold to various developers and disputes over the rights of local people to use the land continued through 2009 (The Center for Grant Studies 2003; The Pueblo Chieftain 2009).

The Baca Land Grant is the result of a land dispute. The Baca grants, of which there are five, were granted to the heirs of Luis Maria Baca in replacement for his 1825 grant near Las Vegas, New Mexico, which was also claimed by Juan de Dios Maiese in 1835. These conflicting claims came to light when the U.S. took control of the lands in the mid 1840s. The Baca claim was settled in 1860, and patented in 1903, when the Baca heirs were given five parcels of land: two in New Mexico, two in Arizona, and one in the San Luis Valley – Baca #4. In various configurations and sizes the Baca #4 lands changed hands many times over the next hundred years with a large portion established as the Baca National Wildlife Refuge in 2000.

The Valley includes large portions of the Rio Grande and the Pike-San Isabel National Forests with small sections of the Carson National Forest in New Mexico. These National Forests were established in at the turn of the Twentieth Century as the American public became alarmed at the destruction of forests by timber and mining interests. The Bureau of Land Management was established in 1946, combining several agencies and policies into one bureau, and owns large parcels of land, primarily in the western and northern parts of the Valley floor. Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve was initially established as a National Monument in 1932 and expanded to include many upland parcels in 2004. Three National Wildlife Refuges: Monte Vista (1953), Alamosa (1962) and Baca (2000) were established to protect wetland habitat for migratory birds along the Central Flyway. Additional lands are owned by the Bureau of Reclamation, the State of Colorado, and several non-profit organizations.

Native Peoples

The post-contact history of Native Americans in the San Luis Valley involves both cooperation and conflict and ends with the establishment of reservations outside of the Valley. Although several Native American groups are represented in the Valley today they comprise only approximately 4% of the population (US Census Bureau 2012).

The Utes (Yutas), consist of several bands and at the time of contact were the primary Native American inhabitants of much of central and western Colorado, Utah, and parts of northern New Mexico. Increased settlement after the United States gained possession of the Valley in 1848, and the surrounding Gold Rush of 1859 brought new people to the Valley and ushered in several decades of escalating pressure to remove the Utes (Ellis 1996). Fort Massachusetts (1852-1858) and Fort Garland (1858 - 1883) were established in the Valley primarily to protect settlers from Ute attacks. The 1863 and 1868 treaties between the United States and the Utes gave the portions of Colorado, including the San Luis Valley, to the United States. Over the next four decades a series of treaties and agreements continued to reduce Ute lands and relocate the Ute peoples with the eventual establishment of three reservations in southwestern Colorado and northern Utah by the early years of the Twentieth Century.

Numerous other Native Americans visited or lived in the Valley, including the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, Comanche, Kiowa, and Navajo (National Park Service 2011:6). Early historical accounts frequently mention various members of pueblos along the Rio Grande coming north into the central

San Luis Valley to hunt bison – causing occasional confrontations with the Utes (Carson 1998: 46; Colville 1995: 146, 211, 22, 225-226). The first Pueblo revolt of 1680, a response to the expanding Spanish control in northern New Mexico, effectively ceased Spanish rule in the region until Don Diego de Vargas reestablished control over the pueblos in 1692 and 1696. The Taos Pueblo rebelled against the occupation of U.S. Troops during the Mexican-American War in 1847, but the rebellion was soon repelled – effectively ending major conflicts in the region.

Settlement

Settlement of the San Luis Valley reflects cultural, economic and political influences as well as creative adaptation to a unique environment. Slowly, following the 1610 establishment Santa Fe as the capital of the New Mexico province, explorers and traders made their way north into the central San Luis Valley. Jacob Fowler encounters several small Spanish settlements during his 1821-1822 travels north of Taos and into southern Colorado (Coues 1965).

The Catholic Church, a primary influence during the initial exploration of the region, continued to play a major role in the establishment of settlements and the day-to-day lives of the majority of the inhabitants. Members of various church orders were often part of the early explorations including the twenty-two Franciscans who accompanied de Onate during his 1598 exploration and settlement in northern New Mexico (Athearn 1989:5). The Church was instrumental not only in matters of faith, but also as educators, trade coordinators, keepers of public records, and builders of comparatively grand architecture. On the other hand, the oppressive condemnation and suppression of the Native religious practices was a major contributor to the unrest that led to the Pueblo Revolt of 1680 and the destruction of several missions. Nonetheless, they began the eighteenth century as one of the only institutions to prosper and soon missions were established throughout the region (Athearn 1989:21). The 1871-1875 journals of a Jesuit order near Conejos, probably representative of similar orders in the Valley, reveals days full of baptisms, marriages, deaths, prayers, attending to the sick, and rituals, with a persistent concern for obtaining basic supplies (Stoller and Steele 1982).

In her 1997 book on the San Luis Valley, Olibama Lopez-Tushar describes the first attempted settlement of the Valley as that of George Gold (Gould) near the Town of Costilla in 1848 (Lopez-Tushar 1997:Chapter 3). This settlement was found to be in trespass of the lands held by the Sangre de Cristo Grant and Mr. Gold was evicted prior to establishing a colony although the Town of San Luis de Culebra was established on the Land Grant three years later (Athearn 1985:50-51; Wyckoff 1999: 40-41). The establishment of the towns on the Land Grants was encouraged and within a few years the towns of San Pedro, San Acacio, Chama, and San Francisco were on the Sangre de Cristo Grant and the towns of Conejos, Guadalupe, Ortiz, and Magote were on the Conejos Grant.

Early settlements in the Valley were established based on the traditional pattern of Spanish plaza with homes, churches and public buildings clustered around a central square and long narrow fields radiating out around the buildings and fronting a nearby creek – sometimes referred to as cordillera or plaza farming (Colville 1995:240). Many elements of the extensive systems of early irrigation canals and water control structures supported small grain fields and gardens and are still in use today. Several large canals and their associated laterals, including the Travelers Canal, the Empire Canal and the Monte Vista canal were all built in the 1880s in response to the increasing demand for the Valley's beans, corn, grains and other vegetables. The extensive irrigation in the Valley was recognized early as a source of future problems as noted by Major John Wesley Powell in his 1890 testimony before the Senate Special Committee on Irrigation and Reclamation of Arid Lands:

Passing into New Mexico, then, the water that practically heads in the high mountains of Colorado is largely, almost wholly, cut off from the Rio Grande, so that

no portion of the water that heads in these mountains where there is great precipitation will cross the line into New Mexico (in the dry season). In a dry season nothing can be raised in the lower region and sometimes the dry seasons come two or three together. (Siebenthal 1910:15)

The mining boom in the surrounding mountains in 1859, the completion of the Denver & Rio Grande Railroad over the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and into the Valley in 1877, and a vigorous advertising effort by land speculators led to a slow but steady increase in population in the later half of the nineteenth Century. Prior to the discovery of gold in 1859, the Valley was the home of Colorado's largest non-Native American population and by 1870 the population of Conejos, Costilla, and Saguache Counties is estimated to be approximately five thousand (Wyckoff 1999:193-194). Speculators capitalized on the increasing number of immigrants heading west from the east and Europe as is illustrated by the description of the Valley in a 1884 promotional brochure:

Society is very good. The intelligence of average western people is far above those of the eastern States. Under the duck or buckskin coat of many a miner, farmer or stockman of Colorado is concealed diplomas from the best colleges of the east and Europe.

The climate is almost perfect. Extremes of heat or cold are unknown, and the land is one of almost perpetual sunshine by day, and cloudless skies at night. The healthfulness of the country is notorious, sickness almost unknown. No malaria, no cyclones, no deluges, and when the orchards of small fruits, apples, cherries and plums, and groves of shade trees are planted, the country will be as fruitful and beautiful as the land of Italy.
(The Republican Publishing Company 1884)

By the early 1870s the effect of hunting and development was already taking a toll on Colorado's wildlife. In 1872 Colorado Territorial Governor Edward N. Cook passed the first game laws to protect certain birds, buffalo, deer, elk and bighorn sheep (Colville 1995:213). His words sounded the alarm that the wildlife needed protection:

I desire to say a word in favor of protecting our game—birds, beasts, and fishes—all of which are being wastefully destroyed...and unless some law is passed...the buffalo, elk, deer antelope and trout will soon become extinct, and Colorado will be robbed of the many attractions she today possesses.



Summary of Known Historic Resources

Information concerning the recorded resources in the Colorado portion of the Valley is summarized from data obtained from the Colorado Office of Archaeology and Historic Preservation (OAHP) in February 2012. Similar trends can be extrapolated for the New Mexico portion of the area. The OAHP data represents the efforts of hundreds of agencies, organizations, and individuals to document and study the past. The counts include sites, buildings, structures, and isolated finds – bearing in mind that an individual resource may have many of these elements and may represent more than one time-period (multi-component) and therefore be counted more than once. It is also important to note that the distribution of the resources often indicates where modern activities have mandated cultural resource surveys and potentially recorder bias as much as prehistoric or historic settlement or use patterns.

A total of 6490 cultural resource sites or properties have been recorded in the Colorado portion of the Valley. Another 2740 isolated artifacts or features have also been recorded in this area. These resources include 4719 prehistoric components, 4091 historic components, 62 components lacking a temporal designation, and 3 paleontological locations with some resources representing multiple components.

Nearly 20% of the prehistoric components are lithic scatters. These locations consist of stone tools and/or the remains associated with stone tool manufacture. Camps, which are lithic scatters in association with the remains of a campfire, are only slightly less common and have been recorded at approximately 19% of the sites. The third most frequent prehistoric site type is architectural (4%), generally consisting of stone circles or alignments. Other relatively frequent site types found in the Valley but never comprising more than 1% include peeled trees (cambium tree), rock art, and human burials. Over half of the prehistoric components on sites in the Valley have not been classified into a particular type.

The 4091 historic components include standing buildings or structures and/or historic archaeological deposits. Many of these are homes, commercial buildings, or public buildings within the towns in the Valley with 100 or more each recorded in Alamosa, San Luis and Monte Vista. Rural sites with historical components often include water control structures (111 recorded), cabins or homesteads (68 recorded), roads or trails (62 recorded), and railroad related features (28 recorded). The 1635 Historical Archaeology components include both isolated rubbish scatters and small features in addition to artifacts or deposits associated with a building or structure.

Two resources in the Valley have been designated as National Historic Landmarks. These include Pike's Stockade (5CN75) from 1808 and the Pedro Trujillo Homestead (5AL706) from the late nineteenth century. Approximately 100 cultural resources in the Valley are listed on the National or State Register of Historic Places. Another 435 resources are Officially Eligible to the National or State Registers but have yet to be formally nominated.

Environmental Insights

As mentioned above, many of the early journals and accounts provide descriptions of the general environment as well as specific animals and plants in the Valley. Although these are antidotal and sometimes lack precise locations or identifications, the information is a valuable source of existing conditions prior to intensive alterations of the region. The excerpts below give some examples of the types of information available.

Bison

Near the Culebra River, just north of the New Mexico / Colorado line in July 1694

It is seen the buffalo graze here because of the dung that was found.
(Don Diego de Vargas in Kessler 1998:32)

Near the San Luis Hills in July 1694

... informed me that many of them had noted a large quantity of buffalo. They sighted and descried at a distance of two leagues by their guess that there was on a spacious meadow a big bunch of wild cattle. Their desire to eat meat as well as to see this herd of buffalo alive led more than eighty persons to mount and go to this meadow where they found more than five hundred head of buffalo.
(Don Diego de Vargas in Kessler 1998:34)

Near the San Luis Hills in July 1694

And so at the time that the Pueblo rebels came in to hunt buffalo that had used the scheme...
(Don Diego de Vargas in Kessler 1998:35)

Near Cochetopa Pass in June 1853

A stream issues from Coochatope Pass and joins the Sahwatch; it is called Coochumpah by the Utahs, and Rio de los Cibolos by the Mexicans: both names have the same signification – Rive of buffaloes. Coochatope signifies, in the Utah language, Buffalo gate, and the Mexicans have the same name for it, El Puerto de los Cibolos. The pass and creek are so called, from the large herds of these animals which entered Sahwatch and San Luis valleys through this pass, from the Three Parks and Upper Arkansas, before they were destroyed, or the direction of their migration changed, by the constant warfare carried on against them by Indians and Mexicans. A few still remain in the mountains, and are described as very wild and savage.
(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:173)

Probably near the New Mexico/Colorado state line in May-June 1859

We have seen several buffalo, and a surplus of rabbits...
(Juan Bautista Silva in Kessler 1998:321)

Probably along the Rio San Antonio south of present day Antonito in May-June 1859

Today we used a rifle to kill a buffalo.
(Juan Bautista Silva in Kessler 1998:322)

Trout and Water Birds

Along the Rio Grande Near Fort Garland in September 1858

Abundance of speckled trout.
(William Wing Loring in Kessler 1998:315)

Speaking of a trip along the Rio Grande in 1877:

We landed frequently and caught all the trout we could possibly use. All along the river's course were old channels filled with back water where we crept in on flocks of young teal and blue wing mallards. Long-legged herons tempted a shot as they rose from sand bars and soared to nests in the tall Alamos (cottonwoods) along the shore (Albert B. Sanford 2004:47).

Speaking of fishing for "big native trout" on the Conejos River near the town of Sanford in 1877:

Our first day's fishing was so successful that it was agreed that the next would be devoted to getting a shipment for Martin Welch's Bon Ton restaurant in Denver, where the boys had a standing order for mountain trout. With an early start, our catch amounted to over a hundred pounds by mid-afternoon. (Albert B. Sanford 2004:48-49).

Antelope, Deer and Elk

South San Luis Valley in March 1822

Having to shut so much at gees for want of larger game killed two Caberey [antelope] and one Elk
(Jacob Fowler in Coues 1965:134)

Near the southern portions of the Valley in 1846 (winter):

On emerging from the uplands, we entered a level prairie, covered with innumerable herds of antelope. These graceful animals, in bands containing several thousands, trotted up to us...
(George Frederick Ruxton, in Kessler 1998:126)

Near the summit of the Sangre de Cristo Pass (La Veta Pass) in June 1853:

The Delaware had killed a fat antelope, which furnished us a hearty supper...
(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:166)

Near the San Luis Hills in July 1694

...and some other very large deer almost the size of those they call elk.
(Don Diego de Vargas in Kessler 1998:34)

Wolf

Near the southern portions of the Valley in 1846 (winter):

As I was "butchering" the antelope, half a dozen wolves hung around the spot, attracted by the smell of blood; they were so tame, and hungry at the same time... I have no doubt that they would not hesitate to charge upon a solitary traveller in the night, particularly as in winter they congregate in troops from ten to fifty. They are so abundant in the mountains... All night long the camp was surrounded by wolves...
(George Frederick Ruxton, in Kessler 1998:126-128)

Turkey, Deer, Antelope and Wolf

On La Trinchera, or Bowl Creek, possibly heading up toward Sangre de Cristo Pass (La Veta Pass) in 1846 (winter)

Antelope were abundant, and deer and turkeys were to be seen on the creeks. ... we have been constantly followed by a large grey wolf.
(George Frederick Ruxton, in Kessler 1998:129)

Wild Horses

Near the present day town of Del Norte in February 1822

We on the Way See Eight [y] or 90 Wild Horses and In devour to git In Shot distance so as to kill one to Eat

(Jacob Fowler in Coues 1965:116)

At Fort Massachusetts (near Fort Garland) in June 1853

Midway to the river they fell in with some Utah Indians, hunting wild horses...

(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:170)

Mountain Sheep / Big Horned Sheep

Along the Rio Grande near Ute Mountain in February 1822

...Camped on the East Side in a Small grove of Cotton Wood trees the Ice In is now so Strong the Horses Can Cross at pleasure – We find nothing to kill Exsept two Big Horned Sheep...

(Jacob Fowler in Coues 1965:114)

East Pass Creek, probably about 15 miles west of the town of Saguache in June 1853

Our Delaware, in commemoration of our arrival at this point, killed a mountain sheep...

(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:174)

Deer, antelopes, and mountain sheep

Uncertain location – probably about 30 miles west of the town of Saguache in June 1853

Saw many deer, antelopes, and mountain sheep.

(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:175)

Grouse

Uncertain location, probably 30-40 miles west of the town of Saguache in June 1853

Mr. Beale shot a species of grouse, larger than a prairie hen, and caught one of her young.

(Gwinn Harris Heap in Kessler 1998:175)

Prairie Dogs, Deer, Antelope, Wild Horses, and Trout

Crossing the Cuchara River Near the Wet Mountains in August 1853

On the table land beyond this river we passed innumerable prairie-dog towns, herds of deer and antelope, and several bands of beautiful wild horses...

...grouse and pheasants, deer and grizzly bear, in every valley and glen, and streams are alive with the finest mountain trout.

(John Williams Gunnison in Kessler 1998:199)

Grouse and Sandhill Cranes

Along Rito Alto Creek in August 1853

A few grouse and sand-hill cranes were frightened from their retreat as we came to camp. Deer also were seen here...

...while pursuing a wounded buck, an hour ago, was driven by a bear, which disputed the passage to the prey.

(John Williams Gunnison in Kessler 1998:213)

Flowers, magpies, and Grizzly Bears

Possibly in the Wet Mountain Valley in August 1853

Countless helianthus, campanula, papilio flowers, and other plants are blooming in the luxuriant grass, and we moved literally on a beautiful, bright carpet of flowers.

Swarms of magnificent magpies encircled us from all sides... For the first time today I hunted a large grizzly...

(Jacob Heinrich Schiel in Kessler 1998:244)

Grouse, Pheasant, Deer, Bear and Trout

On the west side of Sangre de Cristo Pass in August 1853

Game is at hand in unheard of abundance. Grouse and pheasant abound, deer and bear are found in every valley and ravine, and the pretty mountain streams are filled with the finest trout.

(Jacob Heinrich Schiel in Kessler 1998:245)

Beaver and Otter

South San Luis Valley in March 1822

Caught one Bever and one aughter [otter]

(Jacob Fowler in Coues 1965:123)

In the northern part of the Valley along San Luis Creek in August 1853

...containing many beaver dams, which held back the water and forced it to overflow, thus causing broad swamps to develop to the south.

(Jacob Heinrich Schiel in Kessler 1998:249)

Deer, Grouse, Trout, and Mountain Sheep

East end of the Saguache Valley in August 1853

The game in the underbrush is so thick that startled deer often leap across between our wagons. Grouse, too, are in abundant supply, and we catch beautiful trout, many weighing over two pounds, in the clear, pretty creek.

Numerous herds of mountain sheep appeared frequently on the peaks ...

(Jacob Heinrich Schiel in Kessler 1998:250)

Vegetation

Along the Rio Grande twelve miles from Fort Garland in September 1858

The first 6 miles the broad belt of cottonwood continued, since then there has been none on this river.

Near this camp are successions of springs, willow and sage for fuel, grass excellent.

(William Wing Loring in Kessler 1998:315)

North of the Great Sand Dunes along Deadman Creek in August 1853

A few scattered cottonwoods are the only trees upon these streams, on which willow bushes also flourish.

(John Williams Gunnison in Kessler 1998:213)

Along North and South Crestone Creeks at the base of the mountains in August 1853

The sage, however being no less luxuriant, forced us constantly to wind about to avoid the thickest patches. A few small spots of prairie-grass were passed, and marsh grass grew luxuriantly for a few hundred yards on either side of two small creeks.

(John Williams Gunnison in Kessler 1998:213)

Beaver, Cottonwoods and Willows

Along the Rio Conejos about seven miles northeast of the present town of Sanford in February 1822

this party has Caught Some Beaver and there is Sign of more in the River our cors
this day was north 30 West ten miles – there is plenty of Cotton Wood trees and
Willowes along this but Scarce a tree on the main River
(Jacob Fowler in Coues 1965:114)

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