

Changing Hispanic Settlement and Land Use Along the Purgatoire River of Southeastern Colorado

by

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Paper presented at 1998 Society for Historical Archaeology Conference
Salt Lake City, January 9, 1998

In 1993 and 1994, Alpine Archaeological Consultants, Inc. of Montrose, Colorado, conducted an inventory of a 7,150 acre land parcel in the Comanche National Grasslands along the Purgatoire River in Southeast Colorado for the U.S. Forest Service. The project area is an isolated canyon, known as Picket Wire Canyon, in Las Animas and Otero Counties between the towns of La Junta and Trinidad.

The area has a fascinating history. It was the homeland of the Jicarilla Apache until they were forced out by the Comanche in the late 1600s and early 1700s. The Comanche and Ute were allied in raids against New Mexican settlements until 1748, after which time the Ute became the victims of the Comanches. In 1779, the Spanish, assisted by the Ute and Jicarilla Apache, defeated the Comanche. They killed the Comanche leader, Cuerno Verde, resulting in a treaty in 1786. This enabled Spanish colonists to venture onto the plains to hunt buffalo and to trade. In the early 1800s, mobile plains tribes frequented the eastern plains of Colorado. These included the Cheyenne, Arapaho, Comanche, Pawnee, Arikara, Blackfoot, Kiowa, and Kiowa Apache, who were drawn to the expanding trade along the Santa Fe Trail that was focused at Bent's Fort after 1833. Spanish rule of the region ended in 1821 with Mexican independence. The area subsequently was acquired by the United States as a result of the Mexican American War. Hispanic settlers from New Mexico established settlements in the San Luis Valley of Colorado, beginning in 1849, and a few Angloamerican settlements in the vicinity of Pueblo, Colorado, were established in the middle to late 1840s. Ute raids on these new settlements and on communities in northern New Mexico were a deterrent to settlement in the region, with settlers along the Arkansas River driven away in 1854. Military defeat of the Ute later in 1854 enabled resettlement to occur. It is possible that Hispanic hunters and traders living a near aboriginal way of life may have moved into the Purgatoire River valley at that time.

The influx of Angloamericans to Colorado following the discovery of gold in 1859 resulted in increased conflict with the native American groups on the plains. Most of the Plains groups were removed from Colorado by treaty in 1865, but some raiding along the Purgatoire River continued into the early 1870s.

Agricultural settlement along the Purgatoire River by Hispanics from northern New Mexico began in 1867. These appear to have been mainly subsistence farmers and a few sheep ranchers who arrived in the area from the Espanola and Bernalillo areas after briefly having established themselves in Trinidad. Hispanic settlement at first seems to have been comprised of a few small plazas with cooperative agriculture in the immediate vicinity. This quickly changed to more formal claiming of 160-acre land parcels of valley bottomland conforming to the requirements of acquisition under the Homestead Act.

At the same time, Angloamericans began taking up claims along the lower Purgatoire River, and large cattle ranches oriented toward grazing on the plains became established. By coincidence, our inventory area was at the interface between the Hispanic and Angloamerican settlement.

The Angloamerican presence was dominated by the Jones Cattle Company. The company was comprised of three brothers who brought a large herd of cattle from Texas to the Lower Purgatoire River Valley in 1869. By various means, they acquired nearly 10,000 acres of land and used a great deal of the public domain for their cattle herd of about 30,000 animals. In 1882, they sold their holdings to the Prairie Cattle Company, the first English syndicated ranch in the U.S. In addition to their holdings in southeastern Colorado, the company held enormous ranches in northeastern New Mexico and northern Texas. Their method of operation continued that of the Jones Cattle Company, whereby they attempted to control key water sources so that they could occupy and use large tracts of the public domain. They then attempted to prevent settlement upon the land in their realm through intimidation and, sometimes, violence.

The interactions between the Hispanic settlers of the project area and the Jones Cattle Company and, later, the Prairie Cattle Company seems to have had a major impact on settlement patterns. Interactions between the two groups seems to have been rather tense and occasionally violent. The culminating event may have been a raid by the Prairie Cattle Company that resulted in the clubbing and driving of 40,000 sheep out of the Purgatoire Valley and burning of several Hispanic ranches in 1882. Even before this event, small subsistence farmers in the valley had begun selling their holdings to larger Hispanic sheep ranchers of the area who were more able to compete with or resist the large cattle companies. Others sold to Eugene and James Rourke, Angloamerican settlers with a small cattle ranch of their own in the valley. None sold to the Jones Brothers or the Prairie Cattle Company. The large Hispanic stock raisers who benefited from this exodus were mainly Casimero Barela and Lorenzo Abeyta, men who had considerable political clout on a local and state level. Still, the larger Hispanic landowners in the valley disposed of their holdings to Angloamericans by 1885.

Drought and hard winters between 1885 and 1887 devastated the plains livestock industry, bringing to a close the domination of the Prairie Cattle Company. After that time, land ownership in the project area came to be dominated by two individuals. Thomas Conyers, a former foreman for the Prairie Cattle Company, held a large ranch in the northern portion, and Eugene Rourke controlled the southern portion. In between were the holdings of Damacio Lopez, where a Catholic church had been erected and served as a focal point for the early Hispanic community and the focus of a brief resurgence of Hispanic occupation in the 1890s. By 1902, this Hispanic community had dissolved, leaving most of the valley to Conyers and the Rourke Ranch. Conyers lost his ranch to foreclosure in 1927 and, except for a few small land acquisitions on the margins of the valley, the project area was the domain of the Rourke Ranch until its acquisition by the federal government in 1983.

The history of settlement of the Purgatoire Valley has resulted in an unusual concentration of Hispanic sites dating to the late 1860s to early 1880s time period that were generally occupied by individual families and not reoccupied by later land owners. Based on the examination of surface artifacts observed during survey, the sites have readily identifiable Hispanic assemblages that differ markedly from contemporary Angloamerican households and later Hispanic households in the area. Two characteristics in particular are notable.

The first is the presence of what appear to be traditional utilitarian ceramics – a black micaceous ware and a tan-bodied ware – both of which appear to be of a micaceous pottery tradition common in northeastern New Mexico of Indian or Hispanic manufacture. The pottery is of a type most common between 1800 and 1900, though it has been manufactured since at least 1700. The type has only relatively recently been recognized as being a rather widespread Hispanic ceramic type in northeastern New Mexico. Its presence in southeastern Colorado demonstrates a continuity of northern New Mexican Hispanic traditions by New Mexicans in Colorado.

The second trait is the presence of chipped stone and ground stone artifacts in direct association with historic artifacts. Clearly, prehistoric technology was an element of many early Hispanic households. In the case of the Lorenzo Abeyta household, an adopted Indian son may have been the source of the artifacts. Incorporation of Indians into Hispanic households was a common practice in New Mexico prior to elimination of the slave trade in 1865. It appears that stone tool use was integrated into Hispanic households of the period as a result. That stone technology was not observed at Hispanic sites dating from the 1890s and later indicates that the 1860s to 1880s Hispanic households in the project area may represent the last integration of Indians into Hispanic society through acquisition of captured individuals.

The community represented in the project area in the late 1860s to early 1880s time period was a dichotomy between Angloamericans who were mainly involved in the cattle industry and Hispanics who were largely subsistence farmers or sheep ranchers. Personal relationships connecting the two groups seem to have been few. The exceptions seem to have been Eugene Rourke and Damacio Lopez. Lopez operated a store at the Rourke Ranch and possibly his own ranch, was the postmaster for the area, and his ranch and the church there served as the focal point for the Hispanic community of the area. Rourke's connection with Lopez and lack of connection with the Jones Cattle Company and Prairie Cattle Company may have facilitated his purchasing of land being vacated by the initial Hispanic settlers. In addition, Lopez was described as being blond-haired and blue-eyed. His wife, Loreta DeArcia, was of French extraction, her family having arrived in New Mexico from Spain in 1780, settling in a French community in Bernalillo. To what extent the more anglicized appearance of the Lopez family had in successful interaction with the Angloamerican settlers of the area and escaping the wrath of the nearby large cattle companies is not known, but can be surmised somewhat in that the Lopez family had the longest tenure of any Hispanic family in the valley.

The varied cultural backgrounds of the Hispanic settlers of the area as represented by the Lopez family and integration of Indians into Hispanic households is an indication that Hispanic society in at least the late 1860s to early 1880s was quite complex and flexible in its integration of multiple cultural variables. The artifact assemblages associated with the influx of Hispanic residents to the area in the 1890s do not exhibit the traditional ceramics or stone artifacts observed at the earlier sites. At the present time, it is not known if this reflects a change in Hispanic culture or sampling error because a substantial increase in quantity and diversity of artifacts has masked the presence of the marker items. Excavation of these components would be able to clarify the situation.

Artifacts observed at the project sites were classified by function, and trends in functional groups were compared for sites of different ethnic affiliation and time periods. In addition to specific artifacts being indicative of Hispanic households in the late 1860s to early 1880s time period, it was found that Hispanics and Angloamericans appeared to be living at similar socioeconomic levels. A dramatic change took place at sites occupied from the early 1880s through 1890s after the abandonment of subsistence farming by the Hispanics of the area. The Hispanics who remained seem to have gone to work as wage laborers; this is apparent in the artifact assemblages by a considerable drop in the number of functional categories and an absence of agricultural items. At the same time, increased affluence of Angloamerican households is reflected by an increase in luxury items.

The influx of Hispanic settlers in the 1890s to early 1900s may have been made possible by the demise of the Prairie Cattle Company as well as federal intervention against illegal holding of the public domain by cattle ranchers. Like the initial settlers of the valley, small subsistence farms and ranches were attempted. Unlike the initial settlers and wage laborers, the new arrivals appear to have been somewhat more affluent, as suggested by higher frequencies of household furnishings

and personal items. No new Angloamerican settlement took place during this period. Exodus of this Hispanic group seems to coincide with the closing of the Bent Canyon post office in 1902.

Little new settlement took place after 1900. Hispanic and Angloamerican land acquisitions were on marginal lands and household artifact assemblages for both groups are indicative of poverty.

The historic sites in the Purgatoire River Valley are under the protection of the U.S. Forest Service as part of the Comanche National Grasslands. Access and use of the area is restricted, which will continue to safeguard the sites. The archaeological research and historical interpretive potential of the sites is unsurpassed given their excellent condition, ethnic affiliation, temporal diversification, and historical setting, and their potential for addressing a variety of social, economic, and historical research questions. Archaeological investigation could also provide interpretations of architecture, site layout, and function of individual site elements.