Tata Atanasio Trujillo's Unlikely Tale of Utes, Nuevomexicanos, and the Settling of Colorado's San Luis Valley

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"Grampa Trujillo" by Ramon Kelley, 1979.
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One day in 1866, Luis Rafael Trujillo asked his father, Atanasio, a simple question. He wanted to know who was the first nuevomexicano to colonize Colorado’s San Luis Valley, an arid plain the size of Connecticut nestled at over 7,000 feet above sea level between the San Juan, Cochetopa, and Sangre de Cristo mountain ranges. The father, sixty-five years old but still full of life, answered laconically, referring to himself in the third-person: “Atanasio Trujillo, interpreter of the Ute Indians and guardian of the Utes and the Spanish Americans.” It was a terse but revealing reply: Atanasio considered himself the first settler of the San Luis Valley; he was fluent enough in both the Ute and Spanish languages to translate between them; and, he played the intriguing role of “guardian” to Utes and nuevomexicanos alike.

Atanasio’s response said too much too quickly, however, only provoking more questions in his son’s mind. Armed with pen and paper to record his father’s tale, Luis Rafael wanted the whole story, not just a single riddle-filled sentence. From thirty-nine years’ experience with his father, he knew that the man fellow villagers called “Tata” (a northern nuevomexicano term of respect and affection) had more to say. Trying to draw out the loquacious storyteller, Luis Rafael asked a second question: “In what year did Atanasio Trujillo come to the Rio Conejos?” (referring to a river that flows out of the San Juans through the San Luis Valley to join the Rio Grande). The older man began directly enough—“He came to trap beaver at Rio Conejos in 1847.” But
two thousand words later Atanasio was still going strong. Luis Rafael feverishly committed his father's account to paper, producing the "Recuerdos" ("Recollections") of Atanasio Trujillo. A startling document, it tells the story of how Tata Atanasio led a group of nuevomexicanos from the village of El Rito Colorado (north of Abiquiu) to found the new colony of Los Rincones, one of the first non-Indian settlements within the current boundaries of Colorado. Luis Rafael had approached his father seeking answers to a simple question, but he walked away with a complicated, curious, and unlikely tale.4

The "Recuerdos" open as a rather conventional narrative of exploration and settlement in which the wise protagonist—Tata Atanasio himself—leads a flock of subservient, timid followers through a formulaic series of challenges: avoiding Indian troubles, digging an acequia, breaking the earth to plant the first crops, returning to the village to try to recruit other settlers, and so forth. But soon Atanasio starts to tell a story that was anything but conventional. While Trujillo feared Navajos, Kiowas, and Apaches, his relationship with the Utes was altogether different. To Trujillo, they were close friends, loyal allies, and conscientious guardians.5 It was they, according to the tale Trujillo told his son on this day in 1866, who made possible the settling of Los Rincones by protecting the colonists from Indian attack. To claim, as Tata Atanasio did, that Utes actually played the pivotal role in facilitating settlement was to contradict one of the most prevalent ideologies of New World colonization that posed nomadic Indians as savage obstacles to Euroamerican civilization. Yet Trujillo was emphatic. Los Rincones, he made clear, could only have been settled with the cooperation and protection of the Utes.

Tata Atanasio and his followers harvested the first year's crops, then retreated to El Rito to wait out the winter and prepare for a second, more permanent venture northward. In early March 1849, they returned to the San Luis Valley. At Los Cerritos Largos, Atanasio spoke with a group of Utes, "letting them know that he was going to bring some persons or families, as many as he could convince to colonize where he had planted the past year." Because they "esteemed him much," the Utes gave Atanasio the symbolically laden gift of "soft deer skins and a hide of buffalo," after which they "promised him that they . . . would safeguard him and would take good care of him and all the families that would come with him."6 Ute women gave the nuevomexicanos "dried meat of deer and blue corn bread" to sate their hunger on the five-day
return trip to El Rito, and “by order of the captain” twelve mounted Utes escorted Atanasio and Luis Rafael to the southern edge of the San Luis. “Here we go from you,” the Utes said, leaving the nuevomexicanos to fend for themselves. Atanasio warmly responded in the Ute language: “Good, my friends, you have complied with the command of your captain and I am very grateful to you. May God go with you. And may God grant me life and safety to return to you to see you this spring.” He gravely shook the Utes’ hands, knowing full well how difficult the coming days and months would be—the dangerous trip back to El Rito, the arduous task of organizing a colony, and the perilous return journey he hoped to make in mid-April 1849. But one of the Utes, speaking in Spanish, sought to reassure Trujillo: “Come, Atanasio, do not fear. We are the same as sons to you. And you the same, my father, con corazón.”

The first group of permanent colonists arrived at the Rio Conejos the following year, put up makeshift jacales (huts), and hewed “plows and shovels of oak.” All went well until an Indian force materialized out of a cloud of dust along the horizon. Fear and despair froze Trujillo’s followers. “Tata Tanasio,” they cried, “here come the Indians to finish us! Where can we hide to escape the Indians?” Trujillo calmly answered the panicky villagers: “Do not be afraid,” he said, “let us make atole to eat, while we manage these Indians.” Words alone could not placate his people, sure in their conviction “that the Indians would kill them.” Having suffered like the rest of New Mexico from practically incessant Indian depredations in the late 1840s, and no doubt familiar with Indian resistance to earlier colonization efforts in the San Luis Valley and other parts of the nuevomexicano frontier, a shiver ran down the backs of the El Rito villagers. The Indian horsemen would surely take their belongings, run them out of the valley, perhaps even kill them.

But such fears proved to be unfounded. When the Indians arrived, the villagers realized they were the same Utes who had promised protection to Trujillo the previous year. After the Utes spoke to Atanasio and saw that he had fulfilled his promise to bring his people to the valley, they delightedly “fired a salvo with rifle and pistols, made to the sky.” After eating “in the houses of the people,” the Indians “began to make gifts to all, meat and tanned deer skins, items of silver, beads and many other things, horses and saddles.” The hospitality and generosity of the Ute band reassured and invigorated the once-fearful villagers,
so that the people began to believe that Tata Tanasio was the favorite of the Utes. And from that day on the people began to work extensively and with joy. They put in that spring fields of corn and peas, of wheat, of melons, and they had a good harvest and a very good winter. In the spring of the following year of 1850 people began to come to Río Conejos. And thus they were coming.8

“And thus they were coming”—the old man had little more to say about the settling of Los Rincones. At the core of the unusual story Atanasio Trujillo told in 1866 was his close, cordial relationship with a group of Utes that led them to promise his vulnerable colony the security from Indian attacks that it desperately needed to succeed. Finally, the frontier of Hispanic settlement had jumped northward into the long-coveted San Luis Valley.9

If we are to believe the “Recuerdos,” the Utes themselves played a crucial role in fostering this invasion of newcomers into their territory. Why would the Utes do such a thing? Native peoples’ critical role in ensuring the survival of early European colonies such as Plymouth and their sometimes zealous quest to encourage the construction of trading posts within their territories are well known, even legendary. But there are few instances in American history that resemble Atanasio’s story of Ute-nuevomexicano cooperation in the colonization process; rarely, if ever, did non-sedentary Indian groups foster Euroamerican efforts to create agricultural settlements in their midst. And though many Utes maintained durable and often intimate friendships and economic alliances with nuevomexicanos in the northern settlements around Abiquiu and Taos, generally they adamantly resisted Hispanic settlement on their domains. In the eighteenth century, they and their allies menaced and eventually forced the abandonment of Abiquiu. In the nineteenth century, they drove any would-be colonists off Mexican land grants in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado (including the Conejos Grant where Los Rincones was later located and the Tierra Amarilla Grant in north-central New Mexico); and in the years during and after the creation of Los Rincones, the Utes consistently attacked incipient nuevomexicano colonies in the San Luis Valley and frequently requested government involvement to stop further invasions of their territories.10 In 1851, United States Indian Agent John Greiner reported on Ute opposition to settlements in the San Luis Valley. “The Indians
have repeatedly driven the Mexicans from this land they say it is their Winter hunting ground that it contains the bones of their Fathers, and they cannot & will not give it up quietly. Apparently anomalous in both the particular history of Ute-nuevomexicano relations and the broader sweep of Indian-Euroamerican contact, Tata Atanasio’s tale of Utes and nuevomexicanos agreeing upon the creation and protection of Los Rincones settlement seems extraordinary indeed.

Thus it would be tempting to dismiss Trujillo’s tale as an outlandish fabrication. After all, the story contradicts, or at least calls into question, much of our thinking about how Indians and settlers interacted in New Mexico and the rest of the American West. But in this contradiction lay the story’s power. More than one hundred years after Luis Rafael Trujillo scrawled down his father’s words, the tale of Atanasio and the Utes retains some persistent meanings. It asks us to try to understand this place, the San Luis Valley, and those plants, animals, and humans who have made it their home. It encourages us to contextualize this valley in the broader regions and larger historical processes—ecological, economic, political, and so forth—in which it was enmeshed. And most of all, it seeks to shake our confidence in well-trodden explanations of how people gained and lost homelands in what we now call the West. In short, it forces us to take a closer look at the worlds of Tata Atanasio and his Ute friends, so that we may discover how and why each might have come to desire a common end—the settling of Los Rincones.

* * *

Start with the place and its peoples. What did Trujillo and other nuevomexicanos encounter as they pushed north into this landscape? Who were these Utes, and what were they doing in the San Luis Valley? If we could somehow crystallize the valley at a moment in time before colonization, three characteristics of the presettlement San Luis Valley would emerge as particularly salient: the richness and variety of its vegetation, the abundant game this vegetation supported, and the diversity of native groups this game attracted. By ignoring the dimension of time, such a freeze-frame approach inevitably violates the complicated historical dynamics that affected people, plants, and animals in the San Luis. Nonetheless, it serves as a useful heuristic device to set the scene.
for the important changes to come, changes that created improbable outcomes for Utes and nuevomexicanos alike along the chaotic frontier that at once separated and connected the two peoples.

For a land of little rain—seven to nine inches in an average year on most of the valley floor—the San Luis was endowed with remarkably rich and varied vegetation. Elevation, soil type, and access to moisture differed greatly in the area, creating a diverse patchwork of forests, grasslands, scrub, marsh, and desert. Rivers and streams radiated into the valley from the surrounding mountains, carrying water from the high country down through the valley floor and creating snaking stands of willow, cottonwood, and wild cherry usually confined to the water’s immediate edge. Beyond these woodlands stretched lush grasslands, flooded and fertilized by the spring snowmelt. Comprising most of the valley’s land, the large terraces above these floodplains never received the moisture or nutrients floodwaters brought. Here, patches of short grasses, bunchgrass, sagebrush, greasewood, artemisia, marsh grass, and cacti grew in a pell-mell mosaic so complex that they defied easy description, each prospering where soil and moisture conditions were right. Above the terraces lay the foothills and mountains of the valley rim. Here, each species or community of species flourished only within a certain elevation band, from piñon-juniper woodlands just above the valley floor to cedar and ponderosa pine at middle elevations, firs and spruces in the subalpine areas, and tundra above timberline. Particularly in the middle elevations, these forests were punctuated by small clearings described by one traveler as “Little Parks,” “level meadows of from one hundred to a thousand acres in extent, each lying in the shadow of the peaks (generally bisected by a mountain stream), and turfed with luxuriant grasses.” This ecological complexity made the valley an attractive habitat not only for nuevomexicano settlers such as Atanasio Trujillo, who hoped to plant fields on the flood plains, graze stock on the terraces, collect piñon in the foothills, and chop ponderosa logs in the montane forests, but also for other less demanding mammals and the humans who depended upon them.

Game, lured by the valley’s plentiful and varied vegetation, seems to have been abundant in the presettlement San Luis. American explorer Zebulon Pike encountered “innumerable herds” of deer, English traveler George Ruxton described the valley as “covered with innumerable herds of antelope . . . in bands containing several thousands,” and Spanish soldier Don Diego de Vargas confronted a herd of some five
hundred bison shortly after entering the San Luis. As travelers discovered, the valley’s fertility and relative lack of winter snow made it an ideal habitat for many species of game. Small animals abounded, such as the rabbits that gave the Río Conejos its name. Moreover, six species of large herbivores—wild horses, bison, mule deer, elk, pronghorn, and mountain sheep—wintered in the San Luis to take advantage of the naturally cured grasses, forbs, and browse rarely buried beneath snow in the comparatively arid San Luis. Though seemingly isolated by the high ranges surrounding it, the San Luis Valley was far from an ecological island. Several mountain passes crossed the massifs into neighboring valleys, mountain parks, and the Great Plains, providing important migration corridors for game. While no doubt the San Luis herds never compared in numbers to those of some of the adjacent parks or the Plains, the presettlement valley was nonetheless home to moderately large game populations.

There were undoubtedly many factors that drew native peoples to the San Luis Valley—a variety of plant foods and fibers to gather, milder winters than in the surrounding mountains, sacred obligations, and so forth. But the availability of four-legged food feasting on the valley’s rich vegetation was surely an important consideration. The valley figured prominently in the seasonal nomadic cycles of several different native groups. Blanca Peak, one of the four sacred mountains of Navajo cosmology, towers above the valley’s eastern edge, placing the southern half of the San Luis firmly within the Navajo homeland of Dinétah. Meanwhile, several different Plains tribes—Comanches, Cheyennes, Arapahos, and Kiowas—hunted and raided in the valley from time to time. But the most common and permanent occupants of the valley were the Utes, a Shoshonean group that had lived in the Colorado Rockies for centuries, possibly even millennia, before these other groups migrated to the region. In the San Luis, they hunted animals seeking winter refuge, rounded up wild horses, prepared for communal buffalo hunts on the Plains or in the parks to the north, engaged in trade, and waited out the long mountain winters. The basic Ute social and political unit was the extended-kinship group. These families were in turn organized into bands. Each band was free to utilize the lands of its Ute neighbors, but for the most part they remained within discrete territorial bounds. Thus while the San Luis Valley was within the Mouache territory, the Tabeguaches, Uncompahgres, and particularly the Capotes often occupied the valley as well. Though the Utes
always sought to repel Puebloan, Navajo, and Plains groups from the San Luis, their attitude towards the Jicarilla Apaches was altogether different. After joining forces to combat the Comanches in the mid-eighteenth century, the Utes and Jicarillas developed durable ties, fighting off common enemies and frequently intermarrying. Jicarilla visitors entered the San Luis from their core lands to the south and east and often camped in the valley for extended periods. Though used by several native groups, then, the San Luis Valley is probably best conceived of as a Ute borderland, firmly within Ute territory but nonetheless constantly subject to attacks by enemy tribes and shared to some extent with Jicarilla neighbors.

By freezing the presettlement valley at a point in time, a clear image emerges of comparatively rich vegetation feeding substantial game populations and in turn maintaining several native groups, particularly the Utes, as they came to hunt, gather, and camp in the area. But only by setting the picture in motion again can we come to understand Tata Atanasio’s story. Picture Pike descending Medano Pass and traversing the valley in 1807, a Cheyenne raiding party lying in wait to attack a Ute encampment along the Rio Grande around 1830, or Trujillo himself killing beaver along the Rio Conejos in 1847—each at once witness and creator of new dynamics that transformed the valley in ways unimaginable in the eighteenth century. Change had always been a part of life in the San Luis, whether wrought by the floods of spring, shifts in the terrain of intertribal and imperial politics, or the advent of Euroamerican animals, technologies, and diseases. But the changes of the mid-nineteenth century were of an altogether different magnitude. They reshaped the region and, in the process, rendered nuevomexicano colonization possible for the first time—possible, not probable, and far from inevitable.

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Nuevomexicanos attempting to settle the Conejos and Sangre de Cristo grants in the 1830s and 1840s were repulsed by Navajo, Kiowa, and Ute attacks. Astutely realizing that the colonists’ dependence on agriculture was their Achilles’ heel, each of these tribes loosed their animals to trample over the settlers’ fields and destroy their food supply. Direct attacks on the insubstantial jacales of the settlers were simply not necessary; the Indians knew that with their crops ruined, the flustered and
foodless nuevomexicanos would quickly gather their belongings and retreat to their home plazas.

Trujillo and the El Rito villagers, on the other hand, were welcomed to Los Rincones under Ute guardianship. What distinguished the failed efforts of 1833 and 1842 and Trujillo’s venture north in the late 1840s? In the first place, these *entradas* into the valley occurred amidst very different settings. Complicated political, economic, and demographic developments were reshaping the constantly shifting American, New Mexican, and Native American frontiers. And, for often related reasons, important changes were rippling through the ecological communities of the San Luis, with important consequences for Utes and nuevomexicanos. Politics and ecology alone, however, can explain only so much. So second, we must examine how Utes and nuevomexicanos responded to these structural changes, what problems they faced, and what solutions they crafted to cope with the rapidly shifting landscape of the San Luis.

From the first popular Anglo-American treatment of New Mexico in Josiah Gregg’s *Commerce of the Prairies* (1844) to the present day, prevalent Anglo stereotypes of the “lazy Hispanic” have obscured the tremendous dynamism of the nuevomexicano world. But the settlement of the San Luis Valley can only be understood in the context of the exponential population growth of New Mexico in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the strain this growth placed on land and water resources, and the resulting geographic expansion that typified the late Spanish and Mexican periods. From the old towns along the Rio Grande, nuevomexicanos branched out in every direction, settling the upper Pecos, the Chama, pushing farther south from the Rio Abajo into the Mesilla, even building new villages in the Manzanos and other mountains. The push by Trujillo and others into the San Luis Valley was but one component of this “spread of Hispano colonists during the nineteenth century” that geographer D. W. Meinig has rightly called “a little-known event of major importance.”

In the early 1830s, after most of the best irrigable land within the current boundaries of New Mexico had already been colonized, nuevomexicanos turned their aspirations northward to the San Luis. Decades of trading with the Utes, trapping, hunting, grazing stock, and traveling on the Taos Trail and a branch of the Old Spanish Trail had impressed upon traders and travelers the ecological promise of the massive valley straddling the upper Rio Grande. Returning to El Rito after
his 1847 trapping expedition to the Río Conejos, for instance, Trujillo gushed to his fellow villagers that the San Luis was blessed with “much water, much land, and much open space, a very beautiful valley.” He encouraged them to join his colony, for the bottomlands and terraces of the valley were as “fertile for the seed as they could be for the breeding of animals, sheep, cows, and goats. And this place promises to be good for us and for our future generation.”

To appease its citizens and protect its northern frontier from Indian, French, and American inroads, the Spanish government and its Mexican successor encouraged this expansion by making hundreds of land grants throughout the province of New Mexico. These grants included the Conejos and Sangre de Cristo tracts (the former made in 1832 and again in 1842, the latter in 1844) covering most of the southern and central San Luis Valley. The Utes faced challenges on other fronts as well. American expansion, changing intertribal politics, and ecological transformations led to troubling developments on their eastern flank—the buffalo huntinggrounds of the Great Plains. Facing pressure from Sioux expansion, and drawn south by better access to horses and trading opportunities, Kiowas, Arapahos, and Cheyennes migrated in the early nineteenth century into the area that is now southeastern Colorado.

On this crucial segment of their annual subsistence cycle, the Utes soon faced friction with Plains peoples, compounded by danger from raiding parties striking deep into their territory. The situation only worsened as eastern Indians such as the Shawnees, Delawares, Sauks, and Cherokees (forcibly relocated by the United States to present-day Kansas and Oklahoma) advanced westward on their hunts and hemmed in the Plains groups. When the bison herds began to dwindle in the 1840s (a development which will receive more attention shortly), the already heated conflicts between the various Indian groups dependent to some extent on the shaggy beasts erupted. The Kiowas, Arapahos, and Cheyennes responded in a number of ways. They raided trade routes and united in an ill-fated attempt to drive the eastern Indians off. But most important for our purposes, they struck westward against the Utes in an effort not only to prevent the mountain Indians from hunting on the Plains, but also to acquire stock and gain access to traditionally Ute hunting grounds, including the San Luis Valley.

Though American influence in the region remained minuscule for fifteen years thereafter, Pike’s journey over Medano Pass into the San Luis in the winter of 1806–1807 was nonetheless a harbinger of things
to come. With him, a third critical vector of change arrived in the valley. After the completion of the Santa Fe Trail in 1822, the San Luis slowly but inexorably became incorporated into American markets. Taos became an important fur-trading center, and trappers such as Jacob Fowler and Antoine Leroux soon sought pelts in the San Luis.36 The proliferation of the Rocky Mountain fur trade and the construction of new posts in the 1830s and 1840s on the plains and in the mountains to the north and west brought even more trappers into the valley.37 Just as important, the creation of the Santa Fe Trail provided an infusion of American goods and capital to the largely illicit Ute trade, carried on since the seventeenth century by northern nuevomexicanos like Atanasio Trujillo in defiance of government restrictions. While the paucity of archaeological evidence or direct descriptions of the Utes during this era makes it difficult to draw firm conclusions about the trade’s effects, the enormous growth of markets for furs and skins undoubtedly brought important new influences into the San Luis Valley. As the Utes began to participate more actively in the burgeoning fur trade, the flesh and skins of dead animals became commodities that could be exchanged for accurate American rifles, warm blankets, grains the Utes were unable and unwilling to grow themselves, and ornaments that could be used to reflect notions of status, spirituality, or aesthetics.38 Through trade, moreover, the San Luis first became linked—however tenuously—to an expanding United States.

In the late 1840s, the burst of American expansion that followed the Mexican conquest would render the connection much stronger, entangling the Utes in increasingly difficult situations. The war in New Mexico and its aftermath brought U.S. military and civil power to bear on the San Luis Valley and the surrounding region. Through treaties and military might, newly arrived U.S. officials sought to establish American authority and prevent intertribal hostilities, depredations on nuevomexicano and Pueblo Indian settlements, and attacks on the trade lifeline of the Santa Fe Trail. At the end of 1849, the Utes formally signed a treaty with the United States. The first article placed them “lawfully and exclusively under the jurisdiction of the Government of [the United] States: and to its power and authority they now unconditionally submit.” Just as important, the seventh article allowed the United States to define (and hence limit) the Utes’ territorial boundaries, obligated the Utes “not to depart from their accustomed homes or localities unless specially permitted by an agent,” and stated the gov-
ernment’s intent to wean the Utes from “the roving and rambling habits which have hitherto marked them as a people” by forcing them to settle in fixed residences and “cultivate the soil.”39 While federal power remained too weak (and Ute autonomy too strong) to enforce the 1849 treaty during New Mexico’s early years as an American territory, the American-Mexican War had nonetheless further complicated Ute life in the San Luis Valley.

By 1850, Utes such as those befriended by Tata Atanasio Trujillo faced a bewildering set of problems. Nuevomexicano settlers were pushing northward into their lands, Indian enemies struggling with unenviable challenges of their own were stepping up their attacks from the east, and an activist American government had burst onto the scene expecting to have its way. Worse still, these political, demographic, and economic changes engendered devastating ecological transformations across the mountains and plains. The land, the plants that grew upon it, and the animals that fed upon the plants now faced unprecedented pressures. The massive, in some cases even catastrophic, decline of large game in many parts of the West was not the only ecological consequence of the social changes buffeting the region, but it was probably the most important. Anglo, nuevomexicano, and Native American hunters played the best-documented role in the collapse of game populations, but grazing activities, the introduction of new animal diseases via contact with Anglo and nuevomexicano herds, and more “natural” factors such as climate changes likely contributed as well. This story of herbivores dying in the San Luis Valley and the surrounding region is complicated and sometimes dimly recorded, but it would have crucial repercussions for Utes and nuevomexicanos alike as the subsistence base of the Mouaches and other bands inexorably dwindled.

The near-extinction of the West’s bison herds was probably the most influential game decline in the region, and undoubtedly the best documented. Recent scholarship by Dan Flores, Elliott West, and others has demonstrated that the Plains bison were dying in alarming numbers by the mid-nineteenth century. As American markets infiltrated this region, a flourishing trade in buffalo robes developed; at the same time, the influx of new peoples into the area brought increased hunting, swelling Indian and Euroamerican horse herds that competed with bison for forage and shelter, and even exotic bovine diseases transmitted by American cattle. Factors beyond human control such as predation by wolves and climatic change also took their toll.40 The area along
the foot of the Colorado Rockies was particularly hard hit. While travelers commonly noted bison there in the 1820s and 1830s, the southern plains herd was rarely found anywhere near the base of the mountains by the 1840s. Writing from Pueblo in 1847, trader Alexander Barclay complained, "The Buffalo robe business is becoming limited every year from the decrease of the animals itself, which is now becoming such a rarity with us, even at the foot of the Mountains that we have frequently to go one & two hundred miles to get the first sight of one." At roughly the same time, the much smaller herds of the northern Rockies and intermontane basins were dwindling rapidly.

Though the mountain parks and valleys of Colorado would harbor herds of wild bison well into the 1870s (smaller groups of animals persisted even longer), there, too, the bison population was diminished. The decline of the Plains herds had both direct and indirect implications for mountain herds. Experts on the Rocky Mountain bison argue that these herds were composed of animals that had followed the Arkansas, the Platte, and the other rivers of the Plains up to their headwaters in the eastern foothills of the Rockies. As the warmer weather of spring and summer melted snowpacks, the extremely nutritious grasses and plants emerging below the retreating snow line drew some bison up and over mountain passes into interior valleys such as the San Luis Valley and South Park. As the bison receded from the mountain base, then, the mountain herds became isolated from their source populations and received little further influx of new members.

Just as important, the decline of the Plains herds placed substantial stress on peoples who depended on them, and some groups responded by seeking out bison farther west. As already mentioned, hunting and raiding parties of Cheyennes, Arapahos, and other Plains tribes were penetrating into the Colorado front range in increasing numbers, and they were probably joined by nuevomexicano ciboleros (buffalo hunters) seeking an alternative to the long, perilous, and increasingly unrewarding journey to the traditional nuevomexicano buffalo grounds of the Llano Estacado.

More outsiders were likely hunting in the mountain parks at the same time as the Utes themselves would have been stepping up the killing. Some Ute hunters no doubt chose to seek bison and other game closer to home rather than face the growing risk of fall hunts on the ever-longer journey into hostile Plains territory. Yet, as trading posts sprouted on the plains and (in the late 1840s) at the new Mormon set-
tlements of Utah, as high-quality American merchandise pumped new life into the long-standing trading fairs at Taos and Abiquiu, and as nuevomexicano, French-Canadian, American, and even Delaware Indian traders journeyed in ever-increasing numbers “to barter for buckskins and buffalo robes” at the Utes’ winter camps, newer and better firearms greatly increased Ute hunting efficiency.\textsuperscript{48} The Utes were “well armed with rifles generally,” an Indian Agent reported, “and quite dexterous [sic] in the use of their weapons.”\textsuperscript{49} Guns, powder, and lead were not free, of course, and demand for these goods likely led the Utes to kill more bison (and more other game) as they became increasingly involved in the region’s thriving trade economy.

As in surrounding areas, hunting reduced bison populations in the San Luis Valley. Crossing Cochetopa Pass, a high mountain route that acted as an important game migration corridor, members of the Gunnison expedition noted numerous bison skulls, the only vestiges of “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 New Mexicans.”\textsuperscript{50}

But overhunting was not the only cause of shrinking bison populations in the San Luis. In addition to carrying traders and ciboleros northward, the expansion of the nuevomexicano frontier also led to the introduction of domesticated livestock into the valley. In a pamphlet published by Thomas Hart Benton to garner support for the central railroad route to the Pacific, Antoine Leroux, a trapper who may well have known the San Luis better than any non-Indian of his time, asserted that it “was formerly famous for wild horses and buffaloes,” but had become filled with perhaps as many as “50,000 to 60,000 head of sheep and cattle” since nuevomexicanos began taking their flocks there to winter beginning around 1840 or so.\textsuperscript{51} Leroux reported that these animals “did well, feeding on the grass during the day, and sheltering in the woods about the shepherd’s camp at night.”\textsuperscript{52} Leroux’s comments indicate that nuevomexicanos were bringing ever larger herds of livestock to the valley during the same winter season in which bison from the surrounding mountains and valleys passed into the San Luis to join wild horses and other animals to graze on “the abundant pasturage and great shelter” Gwinn Harris Heap claimed could be “found here even in the severest winters.”\textsuperscript{53} This competition for scant winter food
resources would have further diminished the once substantial herds of bison living in and migrating through the San Luis. The bison had not yet disappeared from the area, but the large herds Diego de Vargas had once encountered were gone forever.

Furthermore, bison were not the only species afflicted. Deer, mountain sheep, wild horses, antelope, and elk were subjected to many of the same pressures that had such a devastating impact on the bison. There is little direct evidence about these other species, but it seems likely that just as Indian, nuevomexicano, and American hunters accelerated their killing of bison during the 1840s, they also would have brought down ever greater numbers of other large game. Though generally not as desirable as buffalo, these other animals’ tasty, nutritious meat and useful hides also rendered them vulnerable to market hunting. And, as Leroux’s mention of wild horses suggests, bison were not the only species crowded out as northward-moving nuevomexicanos sought new pastures for their herds of domesticated livestock in the once-wild habitats of the San Luis Valley.

Political, economic, and demographic changes transforming the Mountain West, then, had very real ecological effects. Wild horses disappeared entirely from the San Luis in the early 1850s. And the “innumerable herds” of bison, deer, elk, pronghorn, and mountain sheep described before mid-century not only dwindled, but the remaining herds of these animals also became much more difficult to hunt as they retreated to the rocky fastnesses of the mountains. By the early 1850s, grazing and hunting pressures had combined to transform the ecology of the San Luis Valley and adjacent Ute territories, rendering what was once a region of relative abundance into one where, in Indian Agent E. A. Graves’ words, “all species of game . . . are gradually diminishing, and at the same time growing wilder and more difficult to be obtained.”

We have taken a closer look at the protagonists in Tata Atanasio Trujillo’s “Recuerdos”—nuevomexicanos, Utes, and the landscape of the San Luis Valley itself—in order to discover the complicated dynamics in which the tale is set. The tangle of dislocation, expansion, and migration on Indian frontiers, the more clear-cut extension of American and nuevomexicano frontiers, and the decline of large-game mammal populations in the face of increased hunting and grazing pressure combined to place the Utes in an increasingly difficult position. On the one hand, their access to border areas such as South Park, north-central
New Mexico, and the San Luis Valley was becoming precarious; on the other, game populations were dwindling on just about every major hunting ground the Utes relied upon. Territorial diminution and ecological change made hunting more difficult, and probably less successful. This meant less meat and hides for Ute families. Moreover, for a people who had become heavily involved in trade, it also meant less corn, wheat, and squash, as well as less powder, lead, blankets, and other goods as the ripples of regional change reverberated throughout the faltering Ute economy. With greater access to alternative food sources—jackrabbits, trout, and so forth—the decline of large game populations was not as devastating to the Utes as it was to Plains tribes who were more dependent on a single species, bison, and lacked viable long-term alternatives. Nonetheless, by early 1850, the Utes complained to a U.S. Indian agent that they were “in a starving condition,” and in the following few years the Ute leaders repeatedly requested American officials “to procure for them some little powder and ball, that they might be enabled to secure meat for their wives and daughters.” Reports on the condition of the Utes were sometimes equivocal in the first years of the 1850s, but a bad situation had clearly grown worse by 1853, when agent Michael Steck reported that forty Ute families camped on the Culebra and Costilla creeks were “starving, eating bark of pine and aspen trees for subsistence.”

Though not yet compelled to eat bark, the group of Utes who promised protection to Tata Atanasio Trujillo’s colony of Los Rincones surely had begun, like their fellow tribespeople, to feel the effects of outside incursions. Settlers like Trujillo coveted their lands, Plains raiders constantly threatened to descend upon their camps, and U.S. civil and military officials sought to circumscribe their actions. Game populations were decreasing, and the Utes faced the challenge of replacing in their diets not only the meat that they lost directly, but also other food-stuffs and manufactures they relinquished as their ability to provide animal products in trade decreased. Such were the dilemmas with which this group of Utes were likely wrestling as Tata Atanasio approached them asking for permission to settle Los Rincones and for protection from other Indians.

But here is where regional-scale explanations begin to lose their power. Political, economic, demographic, and ecological changes writ large explain much about the world Tata Atanasio and his Ute counterparts inhabited and the problems each faced. They cannot explain, how-
ever, the diverse ways in which nuevomexicanos and Utes responded to this world or the range of solutions segments of both peoples crafted to cope with the confounding situations they faced. Understanding how and why Tata Atanasio and his Ute allies came to agree upon the setting of Los Rincones demands that we consider Utes and nuevomexicanos historical actors in their own right. To do so, first we need to examine the dispersed nature of power in both societies and the range of ways in which the two groups sought to remedy the ills they faced. And secondly, we must return to the “Recuerdos” to investigate more thoroughly the relationship between Tata Atanasio and his Ute counterparts.

Mid-nineteenth-century political organization in Ute and northern nuevomexicano cultures differed significantly, but authority in both was widely distributed. Few primary sources detail the internal dynamics of southern Ute society before the 1850s, and subsequent anthropological research on the subject is surprisingly sparse. Nonetheless, it is clear that no centralized political structure ever emerged in Ute society; “the Utes” never existed as a unified group under a common leader or leaders. In 1854, New Mexico Governor and ex officio Superintendent of Indian Affairs David Meriwether complained that “The Utahs [sic] are probably the most difficult Indians to manage within the Territory” because they were “subdivided into several small bands under petty chiefs, who,” Meriwether lamented, “acknowledge no superior, and roam over a vast extent of country.”62 These small bands were the largest functional political entities in Ute society; yet even within the band, the principal chief or chiefs lacked coercive power to compel compliance with their decisions. Anthropologist Marvin Opler explains that band structures became cohesive entities in the seventeenth century due to two intertwined developments: the introduction of the horse into Ute culture, and the increased involvement in buffalo hunting this animal fostered. As the Utes adopted buffalo hunting, they developed new forms of authority, such as camp leaders and war societies, to organize communal hunts and maintain discipline in the much larger camps these hunts could support. Nevertheless, Meriwether’s remarks indicate that extended-family groups, whether alone or in small clusters, retained considerable autonomy in Ute culture.63 Probably a subgroup of the Mouache band, the Utes who assured Tata Atanasio that they would guard Los Rincones from other Indians appear to have comprised several kin groups led by a “captain.”64 Given
the dispersed nature of power in Ute society, they possessed the independence to pursue their own solution to the problems regional change presented.

Although for very different reasons, political authority in northern nuevomexicano society was similarly diffuse. Local recalcitrance to centralized control and a widely scattered settlement pattern hampered efforts by Spanish, Mexican, and American officials to govern the area. Power in northern nuevomexicano society resided not in Santa Fe, but in the plaza, where residents were usually related by blood or marriage. In plazas such as Trujillo’s El Rito, explains anthropologist Frances Leon Swadesh, “internal patterns of community authority . . . were built around gradations of deference toward senior members, especially those of the senior lineage, by whose surname the plaza was often known.” The senior men in each lineage were known as “the tatas (literally, grandfathers),” and often served as the civil, military, and religious heads of the community (by the time he narrated his “Recuerdos,” Atanasio Trujillo was known by the honorific “tata”).65 Both Trujillo and his Ute counterparts were members of larger communities; at the same time, family groups and small coalitions of family groups in both nuevomexicano and Ute society exercised considerable control over key decisions.

The dispersed nature of political authority within both societies and the great variety in the particular circumstances confronting different segments of the nuevomexicano and Ute populations led to a kaleidoscopic array of responses and initiatives as different segments of these two peoples sought to navigate the pressing problems regional change created. Nuevomexicanos endeavored to protect the lucrative contraband trade from U.S. government attempts at restriction, to form alliances with Indian groups to resist the imposition of U.S. authority (most notably in the Taos uprising of 1847), and to forestall attempts by New Mexico’s ecclesiastical hierarchy to proscribe the penitente brotherhoods so crucial to the religious life of the northern settlements. They also attempted to eke out an economic niche by winning contracts to provision the U.S. military posts sprouting up across the newly American Southwest. But perhaps most important for our purposes, they strove to relocate to frontier areas such as the San Luis Valley. It was this quest for irrigable and fertile land that led Tata Atanasio and his followers from El Rito to Los Rincones.
For their part, Ute groups responded to the decline of their subsis-
tence base, the most daunting peril they faced, with several strategies.
With bison and horse herds decimated, some Utes may have begun to
depend more heavily on less afflicted species like antelope, deer, and rab-
bit. Others turned to domesticated livestock; the nuevomexicano
herds of sheep, goats, and cattle that had done much to displace wilder
animals were, after all, simple to acquire (whether by raid or by trade),
and could even be driven about like a portable commissary. A party of
Utes that Heap encountered northwest of Cochetopa Pass offered the
startled traveler a drink of milk fresh from the band's "large flock of
tame goats." Raiding was another option. In 1844, the Utes broke off
friendly relations with New Mexico. In the years that followed, they
struck the northern settlements regularly. During one particularly suc-
cessful foray on Abiquiu in early 1850, a Ute party drove off 2,427
sheep, 518 goats, 43 cows, 30 oxen, 3 horses, 2 burros, and 1 mule; in
addition, they acquired 8 blankets, 6 kettles, 4 sacks of flour, 3 rifles, 2
axes, 2 shotguns, and 1 buffalo robe. While the quantity of plunder
was undoubtedly unusual, its composition—showing a clear preference
for livestock, flour, guns, and trade goods, with a notable paucity of
horses—was probably similar to that of other Ute raids of the period.

Many Utes pursued still another tactic by forming alliances with
other peoples. In the late 1840s and early 1850s, joint parties of
Jicarillas and Utes often attacked trade caravans on the Santa Fe Trail
and frequently raided Taos and neighboring settlements. On the south-
western edge of Ute territory, another Ute group united with a band of
Navajos in at least one raid. They "had all left for the Navajoe
Country," a Ute leader from another band reported, "to live there never
to return again." American officials even reported from time to time
that the Utes were involved in efforts to build pan-Indian military
alliances to resist U.S. control over the region. But these reports may
well have reflected the widespread paranoia in the territory about
Indian hostilities rather than actual Ute complicity. Indeed, many of the
Ute chiefs sought to establish friendly relations with the U.S. by
encouraging their tribesmen to comply with the 1849 treaty. Treaty-
making, after all, was a subsistence strategy in its own right since the
government provided chiefs with presents and rations to distribute in
return for their compliance. Amidst this panoply of diverging strate-
gies to cope with subsistence shortfalls—shifting to different food
sources, raiding, and alliance-making—yet another group of Utes pur-
sued tactics of an altogether different sort by fostering the settlement of Los Rincones.

In the flat expanse of the San Luis Valley, along the bottomlands of the Río Conejos, Tata Atanasio Trujillo met with this group of Utes and discussed the possibility of a nuevomexicano settlement at Los Rincones. Each possessed considerable autonomy, and neither was constrained by their membership in larger communities. Trujillo’s intentions were obvious. He sought to plant fields and erect a new plaza, to reap the fertility of the valley’s soils using the plentiful waters flowing down from the surrounding mountains and foothills. The motivations of the Ute group are less apparent. But consider the English traveler George Ruxton’s 1847 visit to the village of Río Colorado, at that time the most northern settlement in what he still called Mexico. The Utes had only permitted the fifty residents of Río Colorado to settle the area, Ruxton claimed, to ensure “the politic savages a supply of corn or cattle without the necessity of undertaking a raid on Taos or Santa Fe.”

Basing his claim on conversations he purportedly had with local Utes, Ruxton went on to declare that the Indians tolerated settlers “in their country for the sole purpose of having at their command a stock of grain and a herd of mules and horses, which they make no scruple of helping themselves to, whenever they require a remount or a supply of farinaceous food.”75 Confronted with a worsening subsistence situation, some Utes encouraged nuevomexicano colonies on their lands to provide better access to crucial nuevomexicano food supplies.

Ruxton’s depiction of “politic savages” exploiting nuevomexicano settlers, however, squares poorly with Atanasio Trujillo’s portrait of alliance and cooperation. Whatever the situation at Río Colorado, the relationship between Utes and nuevomexicanos at Los Rincones was cordial, likely based upon long-standing friendships and economic ties forged over more than a century of trade between Indians and settlers in northern New Mexico and the Ute country. Despite frequent depredations by both Ute and nuevomexicano groups after the peace between the two collapsed in 1844, the close connections that had formed between many Ute and nuevomexicano families often persisted. In her stimulating book on relations between the two groups, Swadesh writes that Utes and nuevomexicanos engaged in an “extended-kin model of interaction.”76 Recall the way Tata Atanasio’s escort of Ute warriors reassured the nuevomexicano before turning back to the San Luis Valley. “We are the same as sons to you,” their leader had said. “And
Fort Massachusetts.
Pacific Railroad Surveys.
you the same, my father, con corazón.” Utes and New Mexicans would amiably associate with their friends in the other group, but these alliances did not extend to the other group as a whole; for some Utes, to raid Abiquiu would have been to open a gaping breach between them and old friends, but for others it merely constituted an attack on enemies or strangers. While elsewhere other groups of nuevomexicanos and Utes committed atrocities upon each other, Tata Atanasio and his Ute friends conversed as old friends, even as kin, drawing upon ties formed through trade in the northern settlements or during Trujillo’s journeys to trap beaver from Ute streams.

On the chaotic frontier of the San Luis Valley, Trujillo and his Ute allies, though motivated by a very different set of factors, both recognized that they shared a common desire—that nuevomexicanos settle the San Luis. With “gifts to all [of] meat and tanned deer skins, items of silver, beads and many other things, horses and saddles,” the Utes signified their earnest promise “to defend” Trujillo and his people “and to be a guard so that the other Indians will not harm [them].” In so doing, the Utes sought to incorporate Trujillo and his followers into their cultural world of generosity and reciprocity. They gave these things so that they might receive others in return. Thus it happened that Atanasio Trujillo and a group of Utes forged the partnership upon which hinged the settling of Los Rincones.

* * *

In 1989, around three hundred descendants of Tata Atanasio shrugged off the mid-July heat as they congregated in Denver for a family reunion. “Trujillo Clan Honors Courageous Ancestor,” read the jump headline in the Denver Post, followed by a summary of Atanasio’s “heroic career.” No parallel reunion of Utes took place, and in the Post story neither the Utes nor Trujillo’s unusual coalition with them received any mention. So ephemeral was the moment of settlement that even Trujillo’s “Recuerdos” contained no mention of the fate of his Ute friends. In the years to come, the destinies of nuevomexicanos and Utes in the San Luis Valley would diverge sharply.

For the Utes, nuevomexicano settlement ultimately proved a short-lived solution to challenges that would only increase over time. Soon the Utes would find their position in the San Luis Valley ever more tenuous as plaza after plaza sprang up on the Conejos, the Culebra, the
Costilla, the Trinchera, and the San Antonio. By the mid-1850s, the San Luis was well on its way to becoming the nuevomexicano homeland it in many ways still remains (though later the influx of Anglo settlers and capital to the area would greatly circumscribe nuevomexicano power in the San Luis). Meanwhile, most Utes continued to face the enduring, even worsening, specters of territorial contraction, subsistence crisis, and population decline. Attacks by Plains groups worsened, even as U.S. troops at Fort Massachusetts and its successor, Fort Garland, kept watch over the Utes from their posts along the San Luis Valley’s eastern edge. As nuevomexicanos planted fields, tended their herds, and replicated the village life of northern New Mexico in the burgeoning colonies, the Utes gradually but inexorably came to lose a once vital portion of their homeland. In an 1868 treaty with the United States, they relinquished this crucial winter hunting ground, grudgingly giving up a valley where rested “the bones of their Fathers” and into whose streams the blood of their ancestors had run.

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NOTES

1. In some documents, Atanasio is spelled “Atanacio” or “Atencio.”

2. For an excellent summary of the valley’s geography, see Thomas Huber and Robert Larkin, The San Luis Valley of Colorado: A Geographical Sketch (Colorado Springs: The Hultberg Center for Southwestern Studies, The Colorado College, 1996). Ethnic terminology in the Southwest, particularly in the immediate post-Mexican-American War period, is extremely complicated. There are two reasons why I use “nuevomexicano” in this essay. First, the term effectively emphasizes the Spanish/Mexican/Indian heritage of my subjects. Second, the term also accentuates the regional specificity of their culture better than the more generic “Mexican,” “Hispanic,” or the term “Spanish American” used by Trujillo himself. I do not italicize the term because such italicization unnecessarily renders these subjects as “others.”
3. The document has been published as “Recuerdos de Tata Atanasio Trujillo,” *San Luis Valley Historian* 8 (1976) (hereafter Trujillo, “Recuerdos”), 8-19. The publication contains both the original Spanish text and an English translation by Ruth Marie Colville. I have sometimes found it necessary to modify Colville’s translation.


13. Diego de Vargas encountered “a meadow and islet with very beautiful pasture” in the southern San Luis. John L. Kessell, Rick Hendricks, and


16. Patient and careful hunters had little difficulty finding game. Zebulon Pike had to travel seven or eight miles from his winter stockade to find his first deer in the valley, but thereafter he was able to kill deer almost daily within a few miles of his camp. Stephen Harding Hart and Archer Butler Hulbert, eds., *Zebulon Pike’s Arkansaw Journal: In Search of the Southern Louisiana Purchase Boundary Line (Interpreted by His Newly Recovered Maps)* (Colorado Springs: The Stewart Commission of Colorado College; The Denver Public Library, 1932), 168-73. George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (1847; reprint, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1973), 216. Jacob Fowler found few game at the southern edge of the valley, but as he moved northward he saw more game and their tracks. His party had not perfected its hunting technique yet, and the men were at the point of eating their packhorses before they successfully began to bring down deer, elk, and antelope. Elliott Coues, ed., *The Journal of Jacob Fowler* (1898; reprint, Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1965), 114-20.


18. There is no record of Navajos hunting in the San Luis, though it seems likely that they did so since the area was closer and less dangerous than the Great Plains. The best work on Navajo bison hunting does not mention the valley. Stanley A. Fishler, "Navaho Buffalo Hunting," El Palacio 62 (1955), 43-57.


22. Albert H. Schroeder, "A Brief History of the Southern Utes," *Southwestern Lore* 30 (1965), 53-78. Hughes, *American Indians in Colorado*, 27, lists the Capotes as the main Ute band in the San Luis, but both Schroeder and the primary documents make clear that the valley was part of the Mouache domain, with the Capotes generally occupying northern New Mexico and the southern San Juan country. These are the standard Anglicized band names, though recently anthropologists have begun to use an orthography that more accurately captures Ute pronunciation. I use the older spellings because most readers are more familiar with them. Omer C. Stewart, *Culture Element Distributions, XVIII: Ute-Southern Paiute*, University of California Anthropological Records, no. 6 (Berkeley, 1942), 233, 237. On Ute subsistence practices, see Anne M. Smith, *Ethnography of the Northern Utes*, Museum of New Mexico Papers in Anthropology, no. 17 (Albuquerque: Museum of New Mexico Press, 1974), 33-68; Opler, "Southern Ute of Colorado," 123-25. The valley was also an important through-route for Utes as they journeyed from northern New Mexico and southwestern Colorado to their fall hunt on the Great Plains. George F. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains* (1847; reprint, New York: Harper and Brothers, 1973), 216. Unfortunately, the anthropological literature on the southern Ute groups is extremely limited.

23. On this alliance, see Dolores A. Gunnerson, *The Jicarilla Apaches: A Study in Survival* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), 219. American government officials often claimed that the Jicarillas were a sort of Ute-Apache hybrid (for example, see J. S. Calhoun to Orlando Brown, 2 November 1849, *Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun*, 69). Two important Ute chiefs of the treaty era, Ouray and Buckskin Charley, had one Ute parent and one Jicarilla parent. Isaac Cloud, "Buckskin Charley," in *The Ute Indians of Southwestern Colorado*, comp. Helen Sloan Daniels (Durango, Colo.: Durango Public Library Museum Project, National Youth Administration, 1941), 86.

25. Most of the surviving accounts of these attacks are found in testimony from the U.S. Court of Private Land Claims' hearings on the Conejos Grant in 1900. Most witnesses who appeared before the court were in their seventies and eighties, and their versions of events differed significantly. On Kiowas, see testimony of Luis Rafael Trujillo, U.S. Court of Private Land Claims, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Claims Adjudicated by the U.S. Surveyor General and by the U.S. Court of Private Land Claims, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe, Case 109, Reel 45 (hereafter Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Santa Fe), 7. The source of hostilities between nuevomexicanos and Kiowas is unclear, since traders from the northern settlements had carried out a long-standing and generally harmonious trade with the Kiowas on the southern Plains. Forrest D. Monahan, Jr., “The Kiowas and New Mexico,” Journal of the West 8 (1969), 67-75. This relationship, however, was sometimes strained, and perhaps colonists entered the valley during a nadir. On Utes, see Luis Rafael Trujillo Testimony, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Santa Fe, 7; deposition of José Maria Chaves, and deposition of Francisco Martín Abiquiu, 1 March 1900, U.S. Court of Private Land Claims, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant, File 29, “Land Grants,” MSS 374, Colorado Historical Society, Denver (hereafter Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Denver), 10, 27. On Navajos, see José Isabel Martinez, Abiquiu, 1 March 1900, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Denver, 16.

26. Martinez testified that the Navajos “would trample [the fields] with their animals when they would take from this country sheep, and cows and cattle.” Martinez, Abiquiu, 1 March 1900, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Denver, 16. Francisco Martín said that when he passed through the valley in 1842 while returning from buffalo hunting to the north, he “heard from the people [the settlers] themselves that the Utes used to let their animals loose on their farms.” Testimony of Francisco Martín, Abiquiu, 1 March 1900, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Denver, 27.


30. Serious water shortages in the El Rito area no doubt rendered Atanasio’s listeners more receptive than usual to such claims. Trujillo, “Recuerdos,” 13.


38. Since the Spanish period, Utes had bartered meat and hides with nuevomexicanos and Pueblo Indians in exchange for agricultural products,
horses, and manufactured goods. Marvin K. Opler, "Southern Ute of Colorado," 158-59. But the opening of the Santa Fe Trail greatly accelerated trade in the region. Weber, Taos Trappers, 52-229. On Ute resistance to farming during this period, see the speech of "Toniachi" (likely Tamuche), in which he stated "my people cannot live as the Americans live, it was never intended they should live so. The Country is not calculated for it. The mountains are sterile, and cannot be cultivated. The Valleys were made to feed our animals." Greiner to Lane, 31 December 1852, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency.


41. West, Way to the West, 51-84. James Mooney, using Kiowa calendars as his source, reports that in the winter of 1848-49, the Kiowas held an antelope drive, a desperate measure they resorted to "only in seasons of scarcity, when the supply of buffalo meat was insufficient." Mooney, "Calendar History," 288.

42. Alexander Barclay to George Barclay, December 1845, in "Alexander Barclay Papers: Transcription from microfilm by Agnes Wright Spring, ed.," typescript at Colorado Historical Society of original at The Bancroft Library, Berkeley, California.


44. J. A. Allen claimed that bison populations only began to decrease in the south, middle, and north parks with the influx of Anglo miners in 1859. J. A. Allen, History of the American Bison, in United States Geological and Geographical Survey, Ninth Annual Report of the United States Geological and Geographical Survey of the Territories, Embracing Colorado . . . for the
Year 1875, (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1877), 533. But just as bison populations on the Plains were already decreasing far in advance of Anglo settlement, so too it seems that mountain bison populations were already declining before the arrival of miners. See, for example, Virginia McConnell Simmons, The Upper Arkansas: A Mountain River Valley (Boulder, Colo.: Pruett Publishing Company, 1990), 35.


47. David Meriwether reported that the Arapahos and Cheyennes were better supplied with arms than the Utes, “and consequently the Utahs dare not visit the buffalo regions in search of food.” Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report*, 33d Cong., 2d. sess., S. Ex. Doc. 1 (1854), 377.


49. Graves to Meriwether, 31 August 1853, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency. For other descriptions of the Utes as well armed, see Calhoun to Brown, 30 July 1850, in *Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun*, 229-30; Graves to Meriwether, 31 August 1853, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico
Superintendency; Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report (1854), 377, 386; Lieutenant Brewerton, writing about travels in May 1848, quoted in John C. Van Tramp, Prairie and Rocky Mountain Adventures or Life in the West (Columbus, Ohio: J. & H. Miller, 1860), 195; and Heap, “Central Route to the Pacific,” 169.

50. Heap, “Central Route to the Pacific,” 137-38. Heap’s informant was likely Felipe Archilete [Archuleta], who Heap claimed “had spent the greater part of his life trading and trapping in the Indian country . . . between the Arkansas and Sevier River.” Heap, “Central Route to the Pacific,” 121-22. Beckwith also noted numerous elk horns and buffalo skulls in this area, “attesing [sic] to the former range of the latter animals to these pastures.” Senate, Reports of Explorations and Surveys, 49.

51. Statement by Antoine Leroux, in Central Route to the Pacific, 48. Leroux claimed that nuevomexicanos from the northern settlements had been grazing in the valley “since Taos was settled by the Spaniards,” but this claim is clearly spurious. No travelers recorded encounters with domesticated animals there in any season prior to the 1850s, but it is clear that nuevomexicanos had begun to use the Conejos and Sangre de Cristo grants for seasonal grazing by 1840. For example, see testimony of Luis Rafael Trujillo, Papers Relating to New Mexico Land Grants, Conejos Grant-Santa Fe, 4. We can modify Leroux’s rather overstated claim, then, to say that for a decade or two, nuevomexicanos from the northern settlements had driven their sheep and cattle to the valley for the winters. On Leroux, see Forbes Parkhill, The Blazed Trail of Antoine Leroux (Los Angeles: Westernlore Press, 1965).

52. Statement by Leroux, Central Route to the Pacific, 48.


55. Other factors should not be discounted, though evidence is lacking. Bovine diseases may have spread to the San Luis Valley. More serious, the severe winter of 1844-45 that killed many bison in the Laramie Plains and in the foothills of Pike’s Peak may have affected the San Luis bison as well. On the Laramie Plains, see Richard Irving Dodge, The Plains of the Great West and Their Inhabitants Being a Description of the Plains, Game, Indians, &c. of the Great North American Desert (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1877), 144; Sebastian Greenway, 14 January 1919, in Early Far West Interviews Extracts & Notes, by Francis Whittemore Cragin, 1. Tom Wolf reports that the 1840s were a period of serious drought in the Sangre de Cristos and surrounding areas. Tom Wolf, Colorado’s Sangre de Cristo Mountains (Niwot: University Press of Colorado, 1995), 76.
56. The palatability of these different animals varied, of course, and the tastiness of pronghorn in particular was probably a function of just how hungry for meat one was. Beckwith encountered a party of market hunters from Taos in 1853 taking deer from the Sangre de Cristos before packing it on asses for the hundred-mile trip back home. Senate, Reports of Explorations and Surveys, 39. Utes brought buckskins to trade at Barclay’s post in November 1845. Hammond, Adventures of Alexander Barclay, 135. Indeed, as far back as 1797, nuevomexicano traders brought back elk and “chamois” (bighorn sheep?) skins from the Ute country. Weber, Taos Trappers, 27.

57. The last reference to wild horses I can find in the valley is in Heap, “Central Route to the Pacific,” 123, when Heap’s party encountered a group of Utes “hunting” wild horses. It is unclear whether they were “hunting” them for food or for mounts. Anglos in the 1870s would report that there was “plenty” of game in the valley. Though the valley no doubt harbored more game than the heavily hunted areas these Anglos came from, it was nonetheless much poorer in game than it had been prior to the momentous changes of the 1830s and 1840s.

58. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report (1854), 386-87. Between 1853 and 1854, Solomon Nunes Carvalho found all kinds of game scarce once he entered the San Luis Valley. Bertram Wallace Korn, ed., Incidents of Travel and Adventure in the Far West (1857; reprint, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1954), 141. Lane reported that game was very scarce in the Apache country. Lane to Manypenny, 21 March 1853, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency. See also E. A. Graves to Meriwether, 31 August 1853, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency.

59. Anthropologists report that “in terms of both the number of mammal species and the quantity of their distribution, the Utes and Northern Shoshones had more access to mammals than all Indians in Western North America” except for a few groups in British Columbia’s Fraser Valley. Callaway, Janetski, and Stewart, “Ute,” 337-38.

60. Lacome to Calhoun, 16 March 1850, Calhoun to Brown, 12 August 1850, and Calhoun to Brown, 12 June 1850, in Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun, 169, 208, 252; Greiner to Lane, 31 December 1852, in Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency.


63. The standard source on Ute political organization is Marvin K. Opler, “Southern Ute of Colorado.” Opler seems to have been heavily influenced by Julian Steward’s cultural ecology approach to political organization, which Steward applied to the western and northern Utes in Basin-Plateau Aboriginal

64. Trujillo never enumerates the group. We know it consisted of a captain, at least twelve warriors, and an unstated number of women. Euroamericans through the 1800s commonly estimated Indian populations by multiplying the number of warriors (including leaders) by five or six; though the accuracy of such calculations might be suspect, such arithmetic allows us to estimate the size of this Ute group as comprising around sixty-five to seventy-eight members.

68. Ward Alan Minge, “Frontier Problems in New Mexico Preceding the Mexican War, 1840-1846” (Ph.D. dissertation, University of New Mexico, 1965).
69. Charles Bent to Medill, 10 November 1846, in Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun, 7.
70. Cyrus Choice to Calhoun, 5 February 1850, in Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun, 142-44.
71. The most infamous of these attacks was the murder of the White party at Point of Rocks. See Hammond, Adventures of Alexander Barclay, 158-59; Tiller, Jicarilla Apache Tribe, 34-36; John Munroe to J. McDowell, 23 May 1850, Calhoun to Brown, 12 June and 30 July 1850, and Calhoun to Lea, 31 August 1851, in Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun, 207, 208, 230, 415.
72. Choice to Calhoun, 8 May 1850, in Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun, 195.

74. U.S. authorities intended rations and presents to be a temporary measure until the Utes could support themselves through agriculture “and other industrial pursuits as will best promote their happiness and prosperity.” “Treaty with the Utah, 1849,” 586.

75. Ruxton, *Adventures in Mexico and the Rocky Mountains*, 208-209. Rio Colorado should not be confused with Trujillo’s El Rito Colorado. The former has since been Anglicized to Red River and is located north of Taos; the latter was a small plaza in the Abiquiu region.


81. On worsening depredations, see Commissioner of Indian Affairs, *Annual Report* (1854), 386, and sources cited in note 35 above. On military forts in the valley, see M. L. Crimmins, “Fort Massachusetts, First United State Post in Colorado,” *Colorado Magazine* 14 (1937), 131-32; Morris F. Taylor, “Fort Massachusetts,” *Colorado Magazine* 44 (1968), 120-42; and Duane Vandenbusche, “Life at a Frontier Post: Fort Garland,” *Colorado Magazine* 43 (1966), 132-48. Interestingly, Indian Office bureaucrats in New Mexico envisioned these posts as offering the Utes protection from Plains raiders. Greiner to Lea, 31 July 1852, Steck to Lane, 23 February 1853, and Lane to Manypenny, 30 May 1853, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency. The Utes complained that Fort Massachusetts was poorly located. Army officials concurred with the Utes’ assessment; hence the post was moved and renamed Fort Garland. Greiner to Lane, 31 December 1852, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency; Crimmins, “Fort Massachusetts,” 131-32.

82. For more on the settlement process in the San Luis Valley, see Andrews, “Settling the San Luis Valley,” 50-64.

83. On the blood of Ute ancestors running through the valley’s streams, see Greiner to Calhoun, 25 March 1852, Letters Received by the Office of Indian Affairs, New Mexico Superintendency.