

Homesteading at Cerro Montoso (ca. 1918-1941)

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Archaeologists with the Taos Field Office have been working since 2007 on a cultural resources survey of the 30,000-acre Cerro Montoso project area, located in a very remote and difficult to access portion of Taos County. Today no permanent habitations are located within or near this area, which lies to the west of the precipitous 600 to 800-foot deep Rio Grande gorge. During the past 10,000 years Native American people intermittently traversed this region but no indications of permanent settlements have thus far been found in the area. In the late 19th and early 20th Centuries local Hispanic shepherders who resided in the numerous small, permanent settlements located on the east side of the Rio Grande gorge began to use the Montoso area for seasonal grazing. No permanent occupation of the Montoso area is known to have been established during this period. The absence of permanent settlements in the Montoso area can be related to a number of factors; the area is remote and difficult access; there is a complete absence of permanent sources of surface water and, the area is located at the southern end of the San Luis Valley which forms an intermountain “cold sink” where winter temperatures typically drop well below -20 degrees Fahrenheit and where there is really no such thing as a frost-free “growing season.” For local people, the west side of the Rio Grande was traditionally referred to as “La Otra Banda;” it was considered “vacant” and unsettled land. A traditional pattern of unrestricted use of La Otra Banda evolved in the late 19th Century that included open grazing of sheep, hunting, and the harvesting of wood from the forested slopes of the several large and very rocky volcanic extrusions or “cerros” that punctuate the otherwise open sagebrush plane of the Montoso landscape.

Throughout Taos County it is largely forgotten that for one brief, twenty year period a rural community flourished in the Montoso area. Beginning in ca. 1918, a rapid influx of “outsiders” moved into the Montoso area. These newcomers began filing homestead patents on parcels of formerly “vacant” lands. In a few short years there emerged a rural community of homesteaders (“strangers” to the local people) in the Montoso area. Many of these outsiders were veterans of the First World War. With their families, these mostly Anglo-Protestant immigrants from the eastern Plains perceived opportunity in the prospect of obtaining free land under the provisions of the Homestead Act of 1862 in a region that contemporary railroad, state and county brochures portrayed in less than accurate terms as something of a farming and ranching paradise.

As local people watched from their homes and villages located on the east side of the Rio Grande, the newcomers began filing land patents and erecting fences and homes on what had previously been vacant and largely unrestricted lands. Prior to 1918, very few land claims were filed on any of the parcels located within the Montoso area. Very quickly a patent “war” ensued as both newcomers and local Hispanics scrambled to claim land under the Homestead Act. In the period between 1918 and 1933 patents were taken out on most of the open land located on the west side of the Rio Grande gorge in the Cerro Montoso area.

Some Hispanic patentees made modest improvements to their acreage, erecting corrals, fencing and small cabins that were generally only used on a seasonal basis while they and their families continued to reside permanently in the older, water-rich settlements located on the east side of the Rio Grande gorge. The newcomers, however, had come to the area with the intention to live there permanently. Their plans, fostered by the enticing misinformation of carefully orchestrated immigrant pamphlets and brochures, were to run cattle and farm small



General view of the Montoso project area today where a small, rural homestead community briefly flourished from ca. 1918 to 1938.



The Dorr K. Smith homestead residence located on the lower east slope of Cerro Montoso (ca. 1930). The remains of this structure have been located by BLM archaeologist working in the Montoso project area.



Alternate image of the Dorr K. Smith homestead (ca. 1927-1928) residents. Visible in this image are Dorr K. Smith, his wife Vera “Newsome” Smith who originally homestead several miles north of the Smith homestead, and the infant Dorothy Smith “Brylinski” who was born on site in 1927 and who is the source for much of the material contained in this account.

plots of land for subsistence, and for “truck” gardens; produce that could be sold for cash in local communities and at the rural railroad stops along the “Chili Line” located 10 miles to the west. Very quickly the new arrivals learned what the local Hispanics had known for over a century: that the prevailing climate and conditions of the Montoso landscape were wholly unsuited to cattle grazing and for most kinds of farming and gardening. While the traditional Hispanic land users continued to graze sheep, the Anglo homesteaders quickly reverted to other means of “making a go at it”.

Wood harvesting became a major endeavor for some homesteaders. Cerro Montoso, one of several large volcanic features within the project area, translates from Spanish to “Timber Mountain,” a name that was used by the Anglo homesteaders. Juniper and piñon fence posts, or “latias,” cut from the woodland slopes of Cerro Montoso, Cerro de la Olla and Cerro Chiflo, became an important commodity for the homesteaders. These were hauled by wagon or truck to Taos and to the “Chili Line” railheads at Tres Piedras and Antonito, Colorado to be sold for cash or bartered for commercial goods. Today, the mountain slopes abound with the weathered remnants of ax and saw-cut stumps from the homesteading period in the Montoso project area.

Another economic activity that some of the homesteaders entered into as an alternative to cattle ranching and farming was fostered by the passage of the 18th Amendment, or “Prohibition,” which lasted from 1919 to 1933. Moonshining and beer making became cottage industries for some of the homesteads. Most of the illicit liquor produced in the Montoso area appears to have been sold into Colorado rather than New Mexico but at least some of it was reserved for home consumption. One remote homestead site contains what may be the fire box and setting basin for a large “cooker,” or kettle that was used to convert the sour mash into alcohol.

The general pattern of land development seems to have followed a common trajectory for most of the eastern immigrants. A single room “dug-out” was constructed first which was covered over by a roof of earth and sod. This covering was supported by a frame of large ponderosa “vegas” and a lattice of juniper “latias” cut from the local mountain slopes. This structure served as an initial residence that would later be converted for use as a root cellar. Above ground structures were eventually constructed at most homestead sites, sometimes of locally milled lumber but also of rough board and “barked” timbers. Most flooring appears to have been packed earth. Flat glass is evident at all of these homestead sites so window glass must have been purchased and incorporated into the construction of above-ground housing. Heating and cooking were provided by wood burning stoves. The remains of simple sheet metal stoves are evident at most homestead sites in the area.

Water was a major problem for the homesteaders. No permanent water sources are located anywhere in the Montoso area. Wells were not feasible as the hard basalt bedrock required deep drilling and pumping equipment that was either not available or cost prohibitive. Numerous small reservoirs were constructed across the arroyos that traverse the Montoso project area in an attempt to impound seasonal run-off. Construction methods employed in building the dams associated with these reservoirs were invariably similar, consisting initially of a linear crib of interlocking ponderosa logs which was then in-filled with earth and basalt rubble. The common design elements and the scale of reservoir construction suggest some kind of collective effort may have been involved on the part of the homesteading community to deal with the general paucity of available water.



Typical cistern-type water catchment feature associated with many of the homestead sites located in the Montoso project area. The uniformity in the design of these catchment features suggests some kind of community wide construction effort.



The Melecio Rael “homestead” site which was used on a seasonal basis to facilitate the grazing of sheep in the Montoso area. Melecio Rael and his family maintained a permanent residence on the east side of the Rio Grande gorge in the village of Arroyo Seco.



View of Dorothy Smith sitting in what appears to be a small patch of potato plants at the Dorr K. Smith homestead, ca. 1930. Root crops such as potatoes and beets were one of the few food crops that could be successfully cultivated in the Montoso project area. Archaeological evidence suggests that homesteaders had to supplement their subsistence needs with store bought canned goods.

Despite numerous, laborious attempts, the fractured and cracked nature of the underlying bedrock rendered unsuccessful the effective impoundment of seasonal run-off.

A large number of the homesteads had below ground, concrete-lined, bell-shaped cisterns. These were fed by gutters and pipes which channeled water from the roofs of adjacent structures. All of these cisterns are similar in design and dimensions which suggests some communal involvement among the homesteading families in finding solutions to their water catchment problems. Mrs. Dorothy [Smith] Brylinski who was born at the Dorr K. Smith homestead in 1927, retains early but very distinct memories of the construction of one of these cisterns at her parents homestead. Mrs. Brylinski, who was interviewed as part of the Montoso project, also recalled that water was trucked in metal barrels from the nearest road crossing of the Rio Grande gorge, located approximately 10 miles to the south at the John Dunn toll bridge. Mrs. Brylinski stated that her father used both a mule-drawn wagon and a Model T Ford truck to haul water in barrels from the Rio Grande to their homestead on the east side of Cerro Montoso. Probable fragments of this vehicle, including the chromed grill and "Ford" logo were found on the Smith homestead site along with the remains of three below ground cisterns.

Hispanic sheep herders used more traditional methods to obtain water from the Rio Grande for their "homesteads" in the Montoso area. The remnants of several very rugged foot-crossings of the deep Rio Grande gorge are present in the Montoso area that were used by Hispanic herders to access their lands from the permanent settlements located to the east of the river. Aaron Rael, Sr., who was born in 1916 in the nearby village of Questa, stated in his memoirs that water was carried by strings of burros up the 600 to 800 foot side of the Rio Grande gorge in five gallon wooden barrels, to his family's seasonal "homestead" in the Montoso area. Aaron also remembered and was impressed by the water catchment systems of the Anglo homesteaders;

I was very amazed and interested in how they gathered their water for their house use. From the roof of the house they piped the water to a cement cistern dug in the ground. I guess they had to pray a lot for rain. No rain, no water.

Aaron Rael, Sr. left a brief description of his family's "homestead", the remains of which have been identified and are located on BLM land within the Montoso project area. Although only used seasonally, Aaron's father applied for a homestead patent and made the requisite improvements.

I did a little homesteading myself Around 1920, my father started a homestead west of the Rio Grande... There was a trail on both sides of the canyon... It was a very steep and rough trail. We had to haul our water from the river for cooking, drinking and for washing clothes.

My father built a very nice jacal with vertical cedar post... It was a big one-room house. We also had hens, so we had good fresh eggs everyday. It was fun for me, but it was a great hardship for my parents. Just to get to the homestead was a big struggle, a big sacrifice... to get to this homestead on wagon [from Questa]... it took us two days... The homestead proved to be too much work for my Father who was also taking care of a flour mill and a large flock of sheep in Questa... When my Tio Ezequiel took over the homestead, I am sure my Mother was very glad.



The Dorr K. Smith homestead residence (ca. 1928). The child in this image is Dorothy Smith "Brylinski" who was born at this site in 1927 and is the source of many of the images and stories used in the account of the Montoso Homestead Period.



Standard World War I era issue military uniform button found at the Dewey Newsome homestead site. Both Dewey and his younger brother Oliver, who also homesteaded in the Montoso area, both served in the U.S. military during World War I.



This photograph taken ca. 1930 of Dorothy Smith "Brylinski" consuming the "dregs" of a homemade beer. Mrs. Brylinski stated that beer dregs were often given to children because they were considered nutritious. Many of the Montoso homesteaders turned to bootlegging during the Prohibition period to supplement the general lack of income produced on their lands. Although Mrs. Brylinski's father, Dorr K. Smith, did not bootleg for resale he did produce beer for home consumption. The structure visible in this image is the main house associated with the Smith homestead. The remains of this structure have been identified and recorded by BLM archaeologists working in the Montoso project area.

Canning of food stuffs was important but possibly not to the extent found in other homestead environments. Although artifacts associated with canning are present at the Montoso homestead sites, these locations also contain the contents of domestic middens that seem to indicate an unusually high dependence on store bought canned goods. This may be indicative of the inability of the Anglo homesteaders to raise an adequate food supply in the harsh, dry and seasonally cold environment of the lower San Luis Valley. Root crops like potatoes and beets were probably a major staple that could be grown in the Montoso area. One homestead photograph shows what appears to be a small field of potato plants in the background. Canned goods supplement the limited garden produce could be grown locally.

It appears that there were enough homesteaders in the area to support a community schoolhouse. Research is on-going and the exact nature of this facility has not been pin-pointed but a possible candidate for the school site has been located by BLM archaeologists. Fragments of slate writing tablets were discovered at the suspected school site, along with an artifact scatter and structural remains that are at variance with the usual domestic homestead assemblage. Vera Newsome, who homesteaded for a brief period with her two World War I veteran brothers on the north slope of Cerro Montoso, was the first and only school mistress. Mrs. Newsome would later marry Dorr K. Smith, also a World War I veteran, who homesteaded several miles away, on the east side of Cerro Montoso near where his father (William Hoffman) and aunt (Eva Hoffman) also had a homestead. Dorr and Vera Smith's daughter, Dorothy Smith Brylinski, was born at the Dorr K. Smith homestead in 1927 and is the source of many of the photographs and stories included in this account.

As indicated above, many of the homesteaders appear to have been veterans of World War I. Several standard ca. World War I period US Army issue brass uniform buttons have been found at one homestead site. Children were also part of the Montoso homesteading environment as indicated by the presence of a community school house. A few artifacts associated with children's activities have been found at several of the Montoso homestead sites.

Relationships between the newcomers and the traditional Hispanic families in the area were sometimes equitable but it was inevitable that conflicts would arise. As Aaron Rael, Sr. recounted in his memoirs, "The local people did not trust the strangers." The Hispanic shepherders resented the parceling and fencing of lands that had traditionally been viewed as open and vacant grazing lands. Some of the feelings between the two groups were related to the differences in prevailing religious and cultural backgrounds. Aaron Rael, Sr. recounted in his memoirs some of the frictions that existed in the Montoso "community";

Some of the homesteaders...started making moonshine with their good connections in Colorado. So la otra banda [the land on the west side of the Rio Grande gorge] wasn't safe anymore. I am not saying that all of these people were mean, most were very nice people, but they couldn't make a living there. There was a gang of outlaws in the area that wanted to take control of the land and scared people away so they would not interfere with their bootlegging business.

Contemporary accounts refer to several shootings and killings in the area. Perhaps demonstrable of these relationships is the story of "El Mata Burros" which is also related in Aaron Rael, Sr's memoirs.



Remains of a root cellar. This feature is located at the Hoffman Homestead site on the upper east slope of Cerro Montoso.



Cast metal toy found at a homestead site located within the Montoso project area. The rural homestead community was large enough to support a small schoolhouse and teacher. The probable archaeological remains of the school house have been located by BLM archaeologists working in the Montoso project area.



Contemporary view of the ruins of one of a number of water impoundment structures that were constructed throughout the Montoso project area during the Homesteading Period. Typical construction consisted of a linear framework of interlocking ponderosa log "cribs" that was in-filled with basalt rubble and earth. The earthen in-filling associated with this structure has eroded away. None of these structures were particularly successful for retaining seasonal run-off due to the fractured nature of the underlying basalt bedrock.

Sometime in the early 1920's my Tio Antonio Rael, was taking care of his sheep in La Otra Banda... His pack of burros wandered away from the sheep camp and into the property of a homesteader... This homesteader killed Tio Antonio's burros and chopped them into pieces with his ax and then fed them to his hogs...

Tio Antonio went back to La Otra Banda with a sheriff's posse de puro mexicanos y dodos de Questa... Tio Antonio spoke to him in English, but the El Mata Burro didn't even acknowledge Antonio. El Mata Burros... finally blew up and in a hard and loud voice said something mean and vulgar to Tio Antonio.

Climaco Vigil was watching everything like a hawk. Climaco didn't understand English, but he knew there was something wrong... He cocked his 30-30 rifle... El Mata Burros immediately started to write a check for the damages.

The site of El Mata Burros homestead has been located and is on BLM land within the Montoso project area. Despite the reputation of El Mata Burros, Aaron Rael, Sr. also noted that relationships with this individual and his family were at least sometimes amicable;

I remember the people that homesteaded Sec. 14, he was called El Mata Burros. They were very nice to us... They had a very nice house built with pinion logs. He was a hard worker.

Mrs. Brylinski also notes that relationships between the locals and her family were generally good but she also relates that her father, Dorr K. Smith, habitually "spiked" or "boobie-trapped" the roads on his homestead and on adjacent parcels to discourage "locals" from cutting timber off of Cerro Montoso.

Despite the best efforts of the newcomers to make an enduring home for themselves, the Cerro Montoso homestead community was short lived. Dorr K. and Vera Smith left their homestead in 1933 with their young daughter Dorothy and relocated to nearby Tres Piedras which was then a thriving stop on the Chili Line railroad. Dorr found work at the mines near Hopewell Lake and Vera became a post-mistress and continued to teach school in the Tres Piedras community. Vera's brothers also left the Montoso area about the same time although both families continued, on occasion, to visit the old homestead places. Others were forced out by economic hardship and an inability to "make a go of it" in the harsh environment of "La Otra Banda." Many families seem to have left the area around 1933 which may be significant since this year coincided with the end of Prohibition. The market for bootlegged liquor plummeted after the repeal of the 18th Constitutional Amendment and the ensuing economic impact to this "particular" cottage industry in the Montoso community may have pushed some households over the edge of continued survival in the area. Still others may have been compelled or forced to leave for darker reasons.

The Sociedad Proteccion Muta De Trabajadores Unidos (SPMDTU) was founded in 1900 by local Hispanic residents in nearby Antonito, Colorado. This benevolent assistance organization was created to assist Hispanic people in the region to combat the long history of discrimination and general abuse that began with the United States or "Americano" takeover of the New Mexico Territory at the end of the Mexican War. In the 1920's the SPMDTU was a powerful organization in



Dorothy "Smith" Brylinski in 2011 at the site of her parents' homestead on the east side of Cerro Montoso. Dorothy was born at this site in 1927 to Dorr and Vera "Newsome" Smith. In the background are the remains of a dugout that served as the Smith's first home. Mrs. Brylinski is retired and now resides in Albuquerque.



Dorothy Smith at the Dorr K. Smith homestead, ca. 1930. She is seated adjacent to the structure that served as the homesteader's home after the dugout in Figure 4 was converted into a root cellar. The structure in this image included both log and "barked" clapboard construction with a packed earth floor and a sheet metal roof. The lower east slope of Cerro Montoso is visible in the background.



A wagon loaded with juniper posts for sale in Taos. This image was taken on the lower east slope of Cerro Montoso at the Dorr K. Smith homestead. Dorr Smith is on the left. His brother-in-law, Dewey Newsome, is center. He appears to be wearing a military issue trench coat. Both Dorr and Dewey were World War I army veterans.

southern Colorado and northern New Mexico. While superficially non-violent, the organization possessed the power to assert itself politically and it is likely that the threat of force and retribution existed, at least unofficially, on local levels. Aaron Rael, Sr. noted that the organization was very influential in the court decisions surrounding the shooting of one of the Montoso bootlegger “outlaws” by a local Hispanic resident. The “shooter” was found not guilty despite compelling evidence to the contrary. Rael observed that “After this case many of the homesteaders left the area for good.”

By 1938 it appears that few, if any, of the original Anglo homesteaders were left in the Montoso area. Local Hispanic people continued to visit the area on a seasonal basis but a number of events, including several very harsh winters and the passage of the Taylor Grazing Act, contributed to the general decline in sheepherding in northern New Mexico. Although sheepherding continued to be important into the early 1950s, the scale of this activity and the attendant traditional life ways was greatly diminished. The memory of the homesteading community in the Montoso area quickly faded and was soon largely forgotten except by a few old time residents. As homesteads were abandoned the associated parcels of land gradually reverted back to the federal government and to the current custodianship of the Bureau of Land Management.

In several ways the Montoso homesteading community was unique. Throughout the western continental United States the “homesteading” movement that changed so much of the country’s rural landscape and culture during the late 19th and early 20th Centuries had diminished substantially by 1917 when America became involved in World War I. Yet, for the most part, the Montoso Homestead Period did not begin until after the end of the war in 1918. As such it represents something of a “final” and rather “pristine” chapter in the history of the Homestead Act, especially in the region of northern New Mexico. Many of the homestead sites in the Montoso area are likewise pristine in terms of condition and preservation. That the community is largely forgotten and the area, in general, is difficult to access and largely undeveloped has certainly helped preserve the archaeological remains associated with this period.

The Montoso archaeological survey has, to date, recorded fifteen distinct homestead sites within the project area. Slightly more than half of the approximately 30,000 acres included in the project area have thus far been inventoried. It is likely that more Homestead Period archaeological remains will be discovered in the future as the inventory survey progresses. Research and field work is ongoing. Although few individuals are still living that were active participants in the Montoso Homesteading Period, oral and written histories provided by local Hispanic families and by the descendants of some of the Anglo homesteaders provide a wealth of information that humanizes the sometimes more anonymous side of the archaeological record. In particular, Mrs. Dorothy [Smith] Brylinski, who was born on Cerro Montoso (Timber Mountain), and the memoirs of Aaron Rael, Sr. (who passed away in 2009), that were provided by his son, Aaron Rael, Jr., provide intimate accounts and photographic images of what life was like in this remote and largely forgotten community that flourished for less than twenty years in an area now largely returned to its original, undeveloped status. The Bureau of Land Management’s mission with regard to the Montoso project area, which is also included within the proposed Rio Grande del Norte National Conservation Area, includes the continued preservation and elucidation of all of its important cultural and natural resources.



Remains of a small root cellar at a homestead site in the Montoso project area.



Homestead site with the remains of sheet metal cooking and heating stove in the foreground.