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| The Baca Ranch: Tragic Exploitation and Triumphant Preservation  Melody Lipke  Senior Division  Historical Paper  Words 2,376 |
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“The magnificent setting in southern Colorado lends itself to open-ended dreams on a grand scale…The magic place is called the Baca” – the *Sunday Camera*, Boulder, Aug. 2 1981

A vibrantly rich history, twisted with the ferocity of grasping for ownership and undercut with the tragedy of nearly lost water: this is the story of the Baca Ranch. The Baca is settled on the edge of the San Luis Valley, contains the 750-foot tall sparkling waves of the Great Sand Dunes National Park, holds sacred lands of the Navajo, and remains one of the most ecologically important areas in the Nation (The Nature Conservancy).

This story is wrought with tragedies: legislation thwarting Mexican people, a near loss of the Southwestern paradise, and a brutal fight between conservation and consumerism. Yet—radiating through— the brilliant triumph of resilient San Luis Valley people who have preserved a cherished culture and one of the world’s most valuable ecosystems.

**The Baca Ranch: Just the Beginning**

A tract of land measuring 496,447 acres in New Mexico is ironically the reason why the Baca Ranch exists. In 1823, Luis Maria Cabeza de Baca and his nineteen sons were awarded a grant by the Mexican government in what is now known as Las Vegas, New Mexico (American Water Development Inc. v. City of Alamosa). The Mexican government utilized land grants at this time to promote development, but in the years following, the land was also awarded to twenty-eight other individuals, or so they claimed (Christman and Short).   After the United States seized control in 1846, these twenty-eight others laid claim to the land. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the U.S. government began to dispute these claims (Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo). The conflict was complex and fervent, so a unique solution was applied: the New Mexico land was swapped for five other land parcels, which were bestowed to the Baca heirs. Four of these properties were in New Mexico, but one was located in Colorado, a 1,000 acre plot in the San Luis Valley. The Baca family didn’t truly put roots down on this piece of land, and consequently, the property was passed between many owners and managers.

Despite its many owners and convoluted history, the San Luis Valley parcel, which came to be known as the Baca Ranch, is the only one of five which can claim the victory of remaining intact. This fact is partially due to a deep treasure sleeping beneath. Water. Underneath the Ranch lies both an unconfined and a confined aquifer (Gibson).   This sweet liquid gold of the earth has driven economy, sculpted society, and formed culture. Water is the purest treasure of the San Luis Valley aside from its people. The Baca Ranch is a reflection of Colorado history: mining, ranching, railroads, and exploitation, all affecting its abundant ecosystems and painting a vivid history. (Christman and Short).

**Exploitation of the Baca Ranch in Ownership**

The complex exchange of land ownership eventually led to decades of tragic exploitation for capital gain. The Baca Ranch was purchased, used, and sold many times before its ecological or cultural value was ever considered.

Not long after the Baca Ranch was awarded to the Baca heirs, they deeded to their lawyer, John S. Watts, to cover mounting legal fees. He then relinquished the land to Territorial Governor William Gilpin in 1862 for thirty cents per acre (Christman and Short).  The grant was then sold to investors, real estate speculators, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, leased to cattle ranchers, and eventually bought by developers who wanted to use the resources for capital gain. (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). The Baca Grant was not being valued for its ecological importance or cultural history, but was rather being bought and sold for real estate profit.

**Ranching History**

Cattle ranching on the Baca Ranch grew to enormous success, and was ultimately a triumph due to careful practices that preserved the ecosystem of the land. Major Alfred M. Collins spearheaded the cattle success, and developed double pasture practices that kept the plant life intact by not overusing the land. Until the 1870s, the Baca Ranch had been leased to cattle ranchers to run their cattle, but the industry lacked direction. George Adams was the first to develop the land for cattle ranching. Some of his improvements included 141 miles of fencing; the first extensive application of barbed wire in the San Luis Valley. He also improved the natural irrigation and built structures such as sheds and corrals. Aside from the 110 miles of irrigation canals and ditches, Adams dug many artesian wells on the property (Baca Grant Rancher). Just as the improvements raised the property value, Adams’ purebred Hereford cattle and hardy interbred Hereford were a major advantage.

Under Alfred Collins, cattle ranching blossomed. Through “drought and depression” the ranch saw national fame with Collins at the helm (Californian Buys Baca). Collins improved and expanded the irrigation, artesian wells, and hay fields. Over the ten years that he improved the property, Hereford bulls from Baca Ranch herds increased both in regard and demand. As settlement moved West, so did the cattle industry, and the Baca Ranch played a large role in introducing the Hereford breed into commercial herds (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). In 1945, the ranch held a Hereford and Hereford Cross cattle auction that broke the world record and attracted an estimated 3,500 buyers, according to the *Colorado Transcript* newspaper (Ranchers Of County).  The Royal Domino line was developed at the Baca and became nationally acknowledged for stock breeding. In 1949, Alfred Collins was named “Cattlemen of the Year,” and was known to have developed one of the best ranches within the U.S. (Baca Grant Rancher). Nationally, the Baca Ranch began to gain respect, and through the lens of cattle ranching, people began to see the ranch as a land of worth that should be preserved.

**Mining History**

Just as the careful and successful ranching practices are considered a triumph, mining on the Baca Ranch were tragic. The history of the Baca Ranch is marked with miners and developers attempting to extract the rich minerals from the property. Unfortunately, mining practices were damaging to the land, unlike ranching practices, and did not retain the original land grant’s pristine nature. The property was ideal for mining, however, not just due to its source of gold, copper, and iron, but also because materials required for mining, such as water and timber, were also naturally present.  The mines stretched for 12 miles across the Sangre de Cristo range (Sale of the Baca Grant). By the 1870s when George Adams became manager of the ranch, squatters had built and inhabited several small towns on the land. Two of the largest were known as Cottonwood and Duncan. Most of the inhabitants of these squatter’s towns were miners. During the time Gilpin possessed the property, he encouraged mineral exploration, and while he retained the minerals rights and earned royalties on all minerals extracted, he allowed the miners to continue. Adams terminated the mining boom in 1885 (Portrait 532). Adams entered a legal contention over the mineral rights, and the ultimate ruling was in his favor. He had all the trespassers in the towns of Cottonwood, Duncan, and others removed, and began to attempt mining himself.   In 1900, U.S. Marshals officially evicted the residents of Cottonwood and Duncan (Trouble is expected).

Landowners were persistent with mining ambitions: to encourage mining, a train spur from Moffat to Crestone was built in 1901 by the Rio Grande Sangre de Cristo Railroad. In 1908 there was a combination of 30 developed and partially-developed mining claims.  By that same year, the largest mine, Independent Mine, had produced more than $300,000 in ore, but this extraction was expensive, damaging, and dangerous. Until Major Collin’s leadership in cattle ranching, the main focus of the grant had been mining. After that time, there was never such a mining craze. Mineral extraction came at a high cost, as did the refining process, due to the distance of such facilities from Baca Ranch. Ultimately, the fixation with mining was dropped, and the focus of the ranch began to shift to other resources ( U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service). Although prospectors were no longer attempting to extract metals, developers began to set their sights on a more precious resource: the water. The aquifers are the lifeblood of the ranch, and if removed, would suck the land dry.

**Lawsuits & Developers: Carved into Sixty-six Hundred Homesites**

From its origin, the Baca Ranch was filled with contention and disputes. The often changing ownership was symptomatic of unappreciative or exploitative beliefs about land ownership and use. Legal issues bubbled to the surface when grazing and mineral rights came to the forefront of the Ranch. The issue climbed to an apex, culminating with the 1900 U.S. Marshal eviction which was a result of a court ruling about these rights (American Water Development Inc. v. City of Alamosa). The ranch saw court again when two leasers, Dimick and Matheson, refused to end their lease even after it was terminated.

Not long after the SLV Land and Mining Company (later renamed SLV Land and Cattle) purchased the Baca Ranch, several developers created a subsidiary company, planning to auction off the ranch in 9,200 tracts of land for agriculture, cattle ranching, timber, and mineral extraction. This project elicited heavy controversy, however, and never became a reality. The citizens of the San Luis Valley had begun to place invaluable worth in the land. In 1950, The Newhall Land and Farming Company of Arizona and California purchased the land for $1,000,000, and the grazing rights and commercial herd for $750,000 (Californian Buys Baca).  By this point it was established how valuable of an asset Baca Ranch was and, in retrospect, is somewhat ironic that the original sale to Gilpin was measly 30 cents per acre, even considering inflation.

The Newhall Company sold the famous purebred Hereford cattle, and then the entire property to the Arizona-Colorado Land and Cattle Company. This was yet another developing company who had plans to subdivide the ranch, but actually succeeded in 1971, selling plots of land in order to create the Baca Grande, a leisure living community. Developments included roads and underground utilities, installed to make the area residential. A supplement printed by the Baca Grande Corporation boasted: “We could have carved the Baca Grande into sixty-six thousand homesites. We settled for sixty-six hundred,” while another brochure touted large guest rooms, television, sauna and pool facilities, a restaurant, a banquet hall, lounges, and events such as tennis and picnics (The Inn At Baca, The Baca Grande Corporataion). The entire project was focused on money, and set the stage for further exploitation.

New development plans were formulated in 1979 by Maurice Strong, who created the American Water Development Inc (AWDI). His goal was to sell water to the front range, piping water from the aquifer under the Baca Ranch. San Luis Valley residents and nature conscious groups protested, and contested this action in court (Woodka).  In a 1994 Supreme Court case, AWDI was forced to relinquish water rights to the Baca aquifer. Another point of contention arose when the Cabeza de Vaca Land and Cattle Company LLC, led by Gary Boyce, bought the ranch and financed a ballot to overturn the Supreme Court ruling and regain access to the aquifer, but the San Luis Valley was resilient and the ballot reflected this with a 3 to 1 tally against the developers (Water claimed).  It was later revealed that Yale University was a 50% partner in Cabeza de Vaca, and fearing scandal from involvement, donated its 1.6 million dollars in profit to The Nature Conservancy to acquire the land (American Water Development Inc. v. City of Alamosa).

Today, The Nature Conservancy and the National Park Service own the land, entrusting it to the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve, of which it is now a part of, the Rio Grande National Forest, and the Baca National Wildlife Refuge. Congress authorized this land acquisition in 2000, and the treasured nature at the Baca Ranch has been untouched since (U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service).

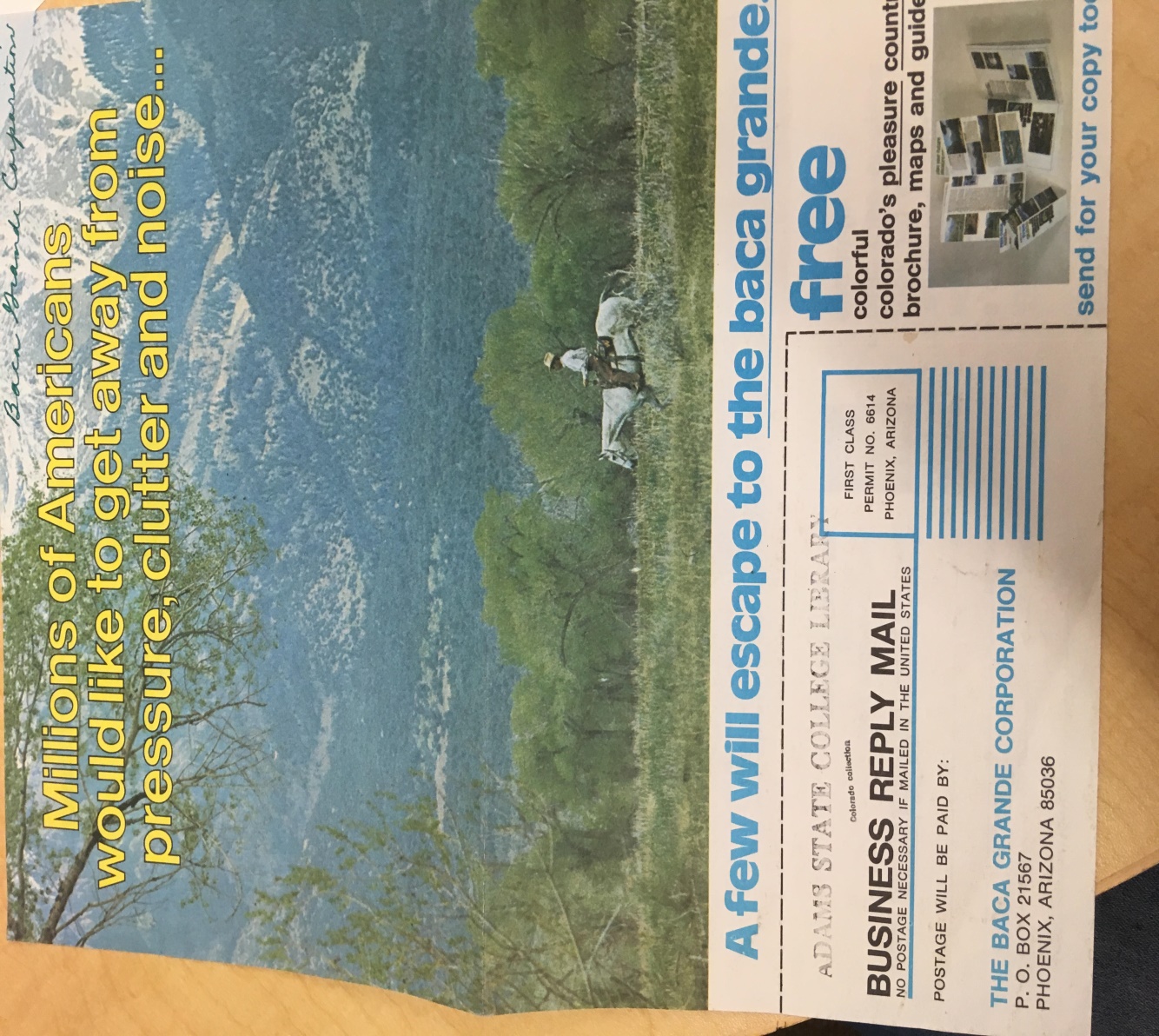
**Ecological Value**

It was vital that the Baca Ranch be preserved. Its inclusion into the Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve has helped protect an ecosystem that is the only home in the world to eight species of insects, and seventy other rare plant and animal types (The Nature Conservancy). The Ranch possesses and protects the tallest dunes in North America, and has two precious aquifers underneath. During Alfred Collins time at the ranch, he guarded the water unyieldingly, and according the Wray Gazette, did not “ allow one drop to leave the property” (Baca Grant Rancher).  One early description of the dunes was given by Zebulon Pike, who stated that “their appearance was exactly that of the sea in a storm…” (Pike 168). Little did he know that an aquifer underneath helped shape and ground the massive sand dunes. This water is vital to the vegetation there, and therefore the entire ecological system, including insects (Valdez).   ome of the aquifer's water is implemented into San Luis Valley irrigation, and helps support an agricultural environment that produces 25% of the nation’s potatoes (Smith). The Baca Ranch, with all its assets, is truly an American treasure.

**Tragedy & Triumph**

Today, the Baca Ranch, which is the only home to insect species found nowhere else in the world, possesses the cherished culture of San Luis Valley ranching, and as part of the Great Sand Dunes National Park, is one of the most revered locations in the world (The Nature Conservancy). The complexity of land ownership and usage of the Baca Ranch threatened to leave tragedy in its wake. The people involved, contrasted against the natural wealth of the earth, led to inextricable motivations; blurred lines between human progress and monetary gain. The pristine nature of the Baca Ranch, with its aquifers, brimming with plants, animals, insects, and mystery under a soaring, endless sky, deserves to be preserved. Ultimately, when people decide to treasure the breathtaking wonder of nature —all of creation— and truly cherish it, that is the real triumph.

**Appendix I**



This pamphlet advertises the Baca Grande Resort, suggesting that the ranch is an escape from the busyness of life, and boasting commodities in the wildness of nature. Similar advertisements were proliferated during the Baca Grade Corporation’s possession of the Ranch.

The Inn At Baca. Advertisement. 17 Sept. 1984. *San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

**Apendix II**



This photo expresses the wild and untamed beauty of the Baca Ranch, and is currently on The Nature Conservancy website.

“Colorado's Baca Ranch.” *The Nature Concervancy*, 2019.  Accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

**Works Cited**

**Primary Sources**

American Water Development Inc. v. City of Alamosa, et al. No. 94-390. Supreme Court of the United States. Oct. 1994.

This exact transcript of the full Supreme Court case provided invaluable information about not only the conflict, but also the background and history of the Baca Ranch.. It sheds light on how the AWDI’s assertions were overturned by the court.

"Baca Grant Purchases 123,000-Acre Ranch." *Rocky Mountain News*, 9 Dec. 1948, p. 4. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

This newspaper article published during the height of the Baca Ranch cattle success details how large the ranch was at the time and that the SLV Land and Mining Company had just purchased the Ranch.

"Baca Grant Rancher Stockman of Year"." *Wray Gazette*, 6 Jan. 1949, xlvi, number ed., p. 3. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

This newspaper publication reinforces Alfred Collin’s success by reporting on his being appointed Stockman of the Year in Livestock in the annual selection by The Record Stockman. This source also provides insight into Collins’ vice-like grip on the water rights.

"Californian Buys Baca Grant Ranch Of 200 , 000 Acres." *Steamboat Pilot*, 17 Aug. 1950, p. 12. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

In this article, the author discusses how Alfred Collins had led the ranch to unprecedented success, but had fallen ill, leading to the sale of the ranch to Newhall Land & Farming company for about 2 million dollars.

*EXCERPTS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE BACA*. *San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

It is unknown if this is part of  a larger work, but this source offers unique insight into the history of the Baca Ranch, particularly the Native American perspective, as well as quotes from other significant figures from throughout Colorado history .

Gibson, Mike, SLVWC. Phone interview. Print. 26 Dec. 2014.

In a previous interview, Mike Gibson helped me understand the difference between the confined and unconfined aquifer.  He also provided information about water law

"Hereford Tour Will View Notable Group Of Bulls." *Steamboat Pilot*, 22 June 1950, p. 10. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Although not directly focused on the Baca Ranch itself, this newspaper article is a helpful cross-reference to the culture of cattle auctions, and the prestige of the Hereford breed. The article also mentions the world record sale at Baca Ranch.

"Page 4 Advertisements Column 1, Baca Grant Disperses at Auction." *Aspen Daily Times*, 16 Sept. 1948. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

It is important to acknowledge how widespread and publicized the ranch was during its cattle ranching prime. Seeing a similar ad in two different publications reinforces this.

"Page 8 Advertisements Column 2, Baca Grant Disperses at Auction." *Wray Gazette*, 16 Sept. 1948, p. 8. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Being an advertisement rather than an article allows viewers a unique view into how the public were presented with the Baca Ranch, truly offering insight into the San Luis Valley Land & Cattle Company’s affluence.

"PERSONALS." *Saguache Democrat*, 7 June 1888, p. 3. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Within this collection of “Personals”, a remark from George Adams is included, which is in regards to his improvements to the property and his plans for further improvement.

Pike, Zebulon. *The Southwestern Journals of Zebulon Pike, 1806-1807*, edited by Stephen Hart and

Archer Hulburt, University of New Mexico Press, 2007, pp. 152-168.

Being one of the first to keep a detailed record of his exploration of Colorado, Pike’s journals contain the first known record of the Great Sand Dunes.

*Portrait and Biographical Record of Denver and Vicinity, Colorado: Containing Portraits and Biographies of Many Well Known Citizens of the Past and Present : Together with Biographies and Portraits of*. Chapman Publishing Company, 1898, pp. 531-532.

This book published in 1898 contains a broad view of Colorado history and details about significant figures in Colorado history, including George Adams, who played a large role in the Baca Ranch.

"Ranchers Of County Buy Hereford Bulls At Baca Grant Sale." *Colorado Transcript*, 27 Sept. 1945, p. 4. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

This newspaper source provides information about the world record sale of registered    Herefords that was held on the Baca Ranch. This helps emphasize the national and international importance of the ranch.

"Sale of the Baca Grant." *San Juan Prospector*, 3 Mar. 1900, p. 3. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Along with interesting details about the size and expense of the ranch, this article describes Baca grant No. 4 as a beautiful and rich tract of land, and accurately predicts its stunning success.

Smith, Erin. "Illegally cut lot may be problem." The Pueblo Chieftain, 4 Dec. 1986.

This is just one example of backlash received by the Baca Grande Development for their tendency to cut legal corners, insisting that under the original treaty and land grant the owners were not subject to state or local litigation.

Smith, Erin. "Land vacations backed in The Baca Grande." *The Pueblo Chieftain*, 30 May 1987.

This article details how the Saguache County planning commission recommended a large piece of the Baca Grande be vacated, and the corporation planned to comply.

Smith, Erin. "Water claimed under old treaty." *The Pueblo Chieftain*, 15 Jan. 1987.

Detailing some of Maurice Strong’s thoughts and expectations, this article exposes the ideology by which the AWDI planned to remove the water from the Baca Ranch. This particular piece lacked the critical tone which many other articles from the time possessed, and also included quotes from Strong.

Somsen, Jean. "Baca Grande development complying with agreements." *Farmington Daily Newspaper*, 24 Oct. 1976.

This article describes a legal issue the Baca Grande development had with the Water & Sanitation District. It illustrates how frustrated the development was under any type of scrutiny.

The Baca Grande . Advertisement.  *San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

This brochure offered to residents of the Baca Grande development, and served the purpose of describing the history of the land.  It focused more on mythical stories of the area and lighthearted anecdotes, however.

The Baca Grande Corporation. Advertisement. *The Valley Courier*. *San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Sent out as a supplement with the Valley Courier, this advertisement for the Baca Grande leisure living community boasted of splitting up the land and creating a luxurious environment.

The Inn At Baca. Advertisement. 17 Sept. 1984. *San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection*. Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

Opening this folded pamphlet gives a view to various pictures of the establishment at Baca Grande, and details of the commodities provided by The Inn At Baca.

"The Magnificent Setting." *Sunday Camera*, Aug. 1981.

This article includes a beautiful quote about the mystery, beauty, and richness of the Baca Ranch. This source is from later in the Baca Ranch’s history, but focuses less on controversy.

Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo. , ourdocuments.gov, 1848. Accessed 13 Jan. 2019.

Under this treaty, the land dispute was resolved, resulting in Baca grant No. 4. This monumental treaty marked the end of the Mexican American War.

Trouble is expected, 22 Jun. 1900. San Luis Valley Clippings Collection, San Luis Valley Clipping Collection.

This was written just as legal issues were brewing with the squatters towns of Duncan and Cottonwood. This piece provides specific details about John Duncan’s outrage at being evicted.

Valdez, Andrew, Geologist, Great Sand Dunes National Park, Phone Interview. Print. 21 April 2015.

Valdez had very useful information about how the loss of groundwater would affect the sand dunes. They would not be as grand, and they would be spread out instead of being tall.  The loss of groundwater would also cause a lot of the vegetation around the dunes to die, which in turn, would also cause many insects and animals to die.

Woodka, Chris. "AWDI changes approach to San Luis Valley water." *The Pueblo Chieftain*, 25 Sept. 1991.

Some of the accusations made against the AWDI are included in this article, as well as the corporations response that fewer wells would be affected than previously suspected.

"World Records Are Set For Cattle Prices at Auction On Sullivan Ranch Monday." *Wray Gazette*, 23 Sept. 1948, xlv, number ed., p. 1. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* .

The proliferation of articles printed about the Hereford World Record Sale on the Baca Ranch allows historians to assess how significant the ranch was a the time. This source also explains that at one time the ranch was known as the Sullivan Ranch.

"World Record Price , $ 87 , 500 Paid For Bull." *Steamboat Pilot*, 27 Sept. 1951, p. 3. *Colorado Historic Newspapers Collection* . Accessed 16 Jan. 2019.

This source mentions Governor Thornton’s participation in the world record sale, and once again reiterates the attention that the Baca Ranch was receiving at the time.

**Secondary Sources**

Abdoo, Mary. *The Baca Grande Property Owners Association - Baca Grande Histo*ry. Accessed Jan. 14 2019.

This source provided an overview history of the Baca Ranch, focusing particularly on the Baca Grande Corporation and the development. The chalets of the development are explained in detail as well.

Christman, Abbey, and  Short, Melanie. *The Baca Ranches Baca National Wildlife Refuge – South Central Colorado*. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service: Region 6- Cultural Recourse Program, 2013. Accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

Factual information is packed into this source, and it was very helpful in finding monetary details, dates, and an exact chronological sequence of events.

“Colorado's Baca Ranch.” *The Nature Concervancy*, 2019.  Accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

Connected directly with the precious piece of land, the Nature Conservancy website offered details on the ecological importance of the Baca Ranch, and the precious value of the water. The Nature Conservancy works to preserve the Baca Ranch.

Smith, Brendan. “Great Sand Dunes National Park and Preserve/Baca Ranch Purchase.” *Red Lodge Clearinghouse*, 1 Sept. 2005. Accessed 29 Dec. 2018.

Along with an overview of the history of the ranch, this site expressed some of the events in a categorical system of successes and failures, which parallels directly with Triumph and Tragedy.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. *Intensive Level Cultural Resources Survey Baca National Wildlife Refuge Headquarters and Cattle Headquarters Complexes*, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. , Center of Preservation Research, 2013. Accessed 8 Jan. 2019.

No detail is left out in this extensive report on the Baca Ranch, including its history and the implications involved with changing its ecological system. This source includes quotes, pictures, and factual details.

“Water Resources.”  slvdrg.org. SLV Development Resources Group. Jan. 2002. Web. 6 Jan. 2019.

This website contains information about the lack of water resources, where resources go, and where they originate, including the confined, and unconfined aquifers. This information helps explain why water is vital to the San Luis Valley.