PASARON POR AQUÍ
THEY PASSED BY HERE

OTERO MESA’S AMAZING PAST

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Prepared for
New Mexico Wilderness Alliance and The Wilderness Society
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(THEY PASSED BY HERE)

CULTURAL AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL TREASURES OF
OTERO MESA, OTERO COUNTY, NEW MEXICO

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As pronghorns race across the grassy plain and halt in front of a four-legged creature pecked into the darkly weathered face of a boulder, we are invited to contemplate the past and those who passed by here, Pasaron Por Aquí. Otero Mesa has such rich history, from pre-Clovis hunters who stalked the buffalo to the Buffalo Soldiers who pursued the Apaches and the indomitable Texas Rangers who were taken down by salt. Among the many cultural and historical wonders of this place, this special landscape is important because:

- Otero Mesa hosts what may be one of the oldest locations of human occupation on the continent.
- Men of prominence are associated with Otero Mesa, such as don Diego de Vargas who was an early Governor of New Mexico and Albert Fall, senator of Teapot Dome fame.
- Otero Mesa was the scene of trails used by many more men, known only by their association with the Texas Rangers or the ninth cavalry of Buffalo (African-American) Soldiers, but who brought together the Wild West and built our nation.
- Places on Otero Mesa represent some of the most sacred of places to the Mescalero Apache for it was their direct ancestors who carved many of the life-sized figures on the faces of weather-darkened boulders.
- The Tigua Tribe of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo also has a significant, long term, cultural, spiritual and historical affiliations with the landscapes of the Otero Mesa.
- Otero Mesa is a place of solace and reconnecting with their past for those indigenous Americans who suffer from historical trauma.
- The largest known ancestral Apache residential site overlooks Otero Mesa from the nearby Hueco Mountains.
- Trails and roads that built a nation and formed our national identity cut across this land, including the Butterfield Overland Stage route.

The cultural resources present on the Otero Mesa already contribute to a number of public values:

- Economic Development and Tourism
- Historic and Environmental Protection
- Education
- Heritage Interpretation
- Recreation
- Community and Tribal Pride
- Cultural Preservation
- Health and Healing

These cultural resources require protection because as greater numbers of people venture into this remote land they threaten to alter, remove, and destroy these extraordinary cultural properties on this incredible historical landscape. Official protection of Otero Mesa will benefit the people in New Mexico—the Land of Enchantment—and Americans as a whole by promoting economic prosperity, educational opportunities, and recreational activity while officially recognizing the values held by indigenous peoples and preserving the intrinsic qualities that make this place special.
INTRODUCTION

Nothing evokes a sense of the rough, untamed past more than the vastness of uninterrupted vistas. Yet, Otero Mesa is unlike any other expansive grassland because it is both dotted with and framed by jagged mountains, providing a unique setting for millennia of human occupation. On the west the escarpment edge drops off abruptly into the adjacent valleys—Where Two Flats Meet— as the resident Mescalero Apache referred to it. This escarpment rim exposes a rough and jumble incline where the earth has cracked open, not yet sanded smooth by the abrasive grit-laden winds. Even here rock shelters and ledges periodically housed people for thousands of years.2

Foothill valleys grace Otero Mesa’s northern and southern edges, with ridges like welcoming arms reaching out onto the plains. The Apaches who live here call the southern margin of the Sacramento foothills, descriptively, Base of Mountain Where Plain Hits It. We do not know what other people called these places. Yet, while their words are silent, history stretches far into the distant past, and the traces left by these people speak volumes, both about their daily life and the things they found extraordinary.

When you hear the wind blow and the grass leaves shuffle, you are aware that it could very well have been Billy the Kid, an Apache warrior, or stalking mountain lion. This is the heart of the Wild West where the west was won by some, and lost to others. This is a land of contention and of consolation; one of success and of desperate failure. These are stark contrasts for a sometimes stark but beautiful land. Modern residents include all who in the recent past claimed, toiled in, fought for, and are buried in this land: the Apache, the Tigua, ranchers, outlaws, miners, Texas Rangers, and military servicemen loyal to three different nations.

On Otero Mesa local heritage and national history intersect in ways that have been so central to our larger national identity. Here the rugged individual—such a cherished part of the American character—was shaped by these equally rugged landscapes. The letters carried across 2,795 miles of rutted and dusty desert passed this way on the Butterfield Stage, informing of joys, heartbreaks, and daily drudgery. Weary passengers doused their thirst at the Alamo Spring Station, staying the night before continuing forward on the hot and jarring trip. We are reminded of the route’s danger by a haunting message pecked in stone at the next stop, Hueco Tanks, by a passenger that did not make it to the subsequent watering hole, struck down by Apache fury before reaching El Paso.3

The drama of the Apache Wars was carried out in this theater of operation, still a source of awe and anguish by those on both sides. This was the heartland of Apache territory where for centuries they were free to live their lives and practice age-old ceremonies, summoning the rain on rods of lightning. They look to the north and see their sacred white mountain or Sierra Blanca, and to the northwest where their sacred Black Mountain lies—the land is rich with meaning and history. The Lincoln County War unfolded nearby, yet the descendants of this conflict have dampened their differences and live together throughout this region, a rough and ready bunch.
Through the ages people have called Otero Mesa home because of its rich and varied environmental setting. They were attracted to its springs, its immense herds, and the unique medicinal plants found only in certain transitional zones on and surrounding Otero Mesa. They were also drawn to the unique landforms whose heights rise steeply from the plains, merging peaks with the heavens. Native Americans, including Mescalero, Chiricahua, and Lipan Apache Tribes and the Tigua Tribe have a long and richly meaningful history with the greater Otero Mesa area. The region’s springs (at Alamo, Cornudas, Crow, Pine), that feed from the largest aquifer in New Mexico (Salt Basin aquifer), also provided focal points for trails that drew many new people through and across the mesa. Consequently, this provincial history became one of national and even world interest with the insertion of Spaniards, Mexicans, and Americans. A review of archaeological and historical resources in the bounds of Otero Mesa reveals an unusually high diversity and density of cultural properties reflecting an especially long period of use. These include:

- World-class petroglyphs & pictographs in rock shelters, on boulders, & on cliff faces
- Locales related to Texas Rangers, including a battle site
- Locales related to Buffalo Soldiers, including a battle site
- Rock shelters and open sites with perhaps the earliest Paleo-Indian evidence on the continent
- Cave-caching sites where the Apache stored food, weapons, and ceremonial gear
- Apache encampments in rock shelters and open sites
- Jornada Mogollon and Archaic pit houses, villages, hamlets, camp sites, and special use locales
- Tool-stone quarries for prehistoric and historic indigenous populations
- Hunting blinds where ancient peoples monitored and ambushed game animals
• World War II and Cold War sites related to Fort Bliss
• Nineteenth and twentieth century ranches and homesteads
• Indigenous trails connecting areas on Otero Mesa and linking the basin, mesa, and mountains
• Butterfield Overland Mail stage line route and stations
• Roads and routes used by early Spanish, Mexican, and Anglo travelers
• Sacred sites, shrines, and traditional cultural properties important to the modern Apache and Tigua tribes of southern New Mexico, Texas, Oklahoma and Arizona.

Some of these highlights are summarized here:

**GOVERNOR VARGAS DRINKS CHOCOLATE AT ALAMO SPRING**

Diego de Vargas Zapata y Luján Ponce de León y Contreras, commonly known as don Diego de Vargas, was the newly appointed Spanish Governor of the territory of Nuevo México. He led the 1692 reconquest after the territory fell during the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. A few months before the reconquest, in April 1692, he traveled from El Paso-Juarez across Otero Mesa seeking the Apaches’ salina or salt bed just west of the Guadalupe Mountains. En route he stopped at Alamo Spring where he and his men enjoyed chocolate:

"I found the scouts at El Alamo water hole, and they told me the water hole scarcely had enough water for the people (much less the horses.) We drank our chocolate there, because we could not build a fire the night before lest we be discovered by the enemy thought to frequent the water hole."

The group then headed on to the spring at the Cornudas Mountains (Spanish for "horned"), through Crow Springs (near modern day Crow Flat and Dell City), and on to the salt lake, which was the destination he sought. From there Vargas and some of his men continued on to the Guadalupe Mountains, in the vicinity of Guadalupe Peak, which is the highest point in Texas.¹

**BUFFALO SOLDIERS ON OTERO MESA**

In 1870 the Ninth Cavalry’s black troopers out of Fort Quitman, Texas (due south and only 60 miles from Otero Mesa) took the fight to Otero Mesa, the Guadalupe Mountains, and other nearby mountains. Feats of Buffalo Soldiers, as occurred during this scuffle and the legends resulting there from, have been woven into the fabric of American nation building.

These African-American soldiers were first called Buffalo Soldiers by Cheyenne warriors who saw a resemblance between their curly hair and that of the bison. This was a title these servicemen proudly accepted and they have since been known by this name.

Major Albert P. Morrow and ninety-one men from H and I companies headed east from El Paso hoping to intercept Apaches. They headed toward Pine Spring at the south edge of the Guadalupe Mountains where they would rendezvous with reinforcements from forts Stockton and Davis. While camping at the Cornudas Mountains, Private John Johnson accidentally set the range on fire. As it spread rapidly across the mesa billows of smoke alerted the Apaches to their presence. This prompted a retort of worried smoke signals from the surrounding mountains. As the column continued on to Pine Spring they were accompanied by smoke signals on all sides.

Soon after reaching their destination Corporal Ross of I Company was sent back toward Otero Mesa to escort the slower wagons forward while the remaining men constructed a base camp. By this time some of the closest Apache warriors, who until then had been observing the column from afar, capitalized on the opportunity. With the corporal now separated from the main force the odds were now more reasonable and three Mescaleros attacked. This prompted Ross to drop his bridle, and spur his mount into a full run, while he furiously shot the way clear. He was able to successfully repel the attackers, killing one Mescalero. Ross continued on to the wagons and escorted them to the base camp. After nine days pursuing Apaches in the adjacent Guadalupe Mountains, Major Morrow and his troops rested at Crow Springs on Otero Mesa before heading out again, this time to the east and then the south.²

**BUTTERFIELD OVERLAND MAIL ROUTE**

The famous stage route—the Butterfield Overland Mail—was a 2,795 mile-long route with a halfway point near El Paso. Its 140 stations were on average 20 miles apart, where horses were exchanged and passengers were provided with meals. Otero Mesa had three stations at Alamo, Cornudas, and Crow Springs. Twenty-five days were allotted for the trip from St. Louis to San Francisco. While the stage averaged 5 miles per hour, Otero Mesa was included in...
the slowest portion of the route: the 415-mile segment between Fort Chadbourne and El Paso which averaged only 2½ miles per hour. Passengers traveled by Concord Coach but in the desert and mountainous portions of the trail they used celerity wagons, aka, mud wagons. Among the hardships were the slow and tedious travel, occasional Apache attacks, overturned coaches, and runaway mules (used for this portion of the route instead of horses). Compounding these adversities were what one passenger described as "stereotype meals" of jerked beef cooked on the [buffalo] 'chips', raw onions, crackers slightly wormy, and a bit of bacon.6

ROCK ART

Instead of a message in a bottle, on Otero Mesa we see the ancient's memos etched into stone faces. These proclaim territorial priority, are witness to spiritual connection, and announce success in life's daily pursuits.

Otero Mesa has been referred to as the holy grail of rock art sites. The rock art found on Otero Mesa is world class. At one especially nice location where rock art clusters, the panels exceed in areal extent, density, and quality other world renowned locations, such as nearby Hueco Tanks State Park (pronounced WHEY KOE) which has 3,000 petroglyphs and pictographs. Otero Mesa likely has an even greater number—perhaps double the number—although no one knows for sure because recording on a volunteer-basis has just begun. This especially nice rock art location encompasses an area that is four times larger than Hueco Tanks and is also much steeper and more rugged. This location also has a much greater diversity of site and feature types than world renowned Hueco Tanks State Park and than many other regionally and nationally important locations recognized for their cultural value.7

At this rock art location on Otero Mesa the designs, as well as differences in weathering, indicate that there is rock art from many different time periods. There is a record from at least the Archaic period (8,000 years ago), when many abstract and representational style images were etched, to the recent historic past where Butterfield Stage passengers carved their names and indigenous cowboys pecked images from their mythological legends.

The Apache rock art at this site is first-rate, with incredibly detailed and sizable images, and each panel is unique—qualities that, along with its remoteness, make it especially vulnerable. Apache wind gods are etched clearly on the stone, over earlier but similar images, attesting to great temporal depth of Apache occupation in this area. Shielded warriors, horses with and without riders, and others with western-style hats attest to the historic presence of these people, while chronicling the substantial changes that occurred in the region. Other images document changes that did not come to pass: railroad cars etched into the rock have proven more durable than the railroad course surveyed but not built along this route. The goggle-eyed images attributed to the Jornada Mogollon are thought to represent the rain god Taloc, while elaborate hatched and zigzag designs, likely represent clouds, lightening, and snakes conveying the reverence for water held by all these desert occupants. Apache rain and wind supernaturals are durably etched here as well, attesting to the well being provided by ample rain. Severed human limbs may attest to trophy taking by prehistoric peoples and the contested nature of this terrain, while animal depictions, often with atlatl, spears, and arrows, likely represent game killed or magic to solicit a successful hunt. Elaborate exotic designs may suggest a quest for visions with the aid of peyote or a spiritual leader’s visualization of a mystical being. This place and others on Otero Mesa are critically important because they exhibit associations between rock art, features (housing, shrines, caches, etc.), and artifacts that are found in no other known contexts for the Apache.
**Apache Encampments:**

**Cerro Rojo**

Also rare are the supersized encampments where numerous Apache bands came together for special purposes, including for planning raids, warfare, or communal hunts or for ceremonies and other social purposes. One of these huge encampments is known in the Hueco Mountains, a range that overlooks Otero Mesa. This mountain range was important to the Apache who found refuge there. Spanish military personnel pursued the Apache into the Hueco Mountains on more than one occasion.8

In 1792 an Apache girl had escaped and found her way to the Hueco Mountains, very likely to the Cerro Rojo site. She had been captured and traded for animals and goods to a Spanish family where she served as a domestic servant. She was eventually recaptured in these mountains and sent back to live among her European family along the Rio Grande. This very personal event, writ large in the history of the Spanish empire, reminds us all of our connection to one another and the commonality of the human experience and tragedy.9

**Apache Cave Caches**

Rock shelters were put to special use by the Apache. These natural shelters shielded the fatigued traveler and their fires on cold windy nights. Other rock shelters were used for storage of ceremonial paraphernalia, as well as food and supplies. Being mobile, the Apache would return at a later time to retrieve the stored goods, perhaps in a time of shortage or after their encampment was attacked and all possessions and food destroyed.

The Apache constructed a unique form of storage platform. These special types of storage platforms were first identified and dated on Otero Mesa where they were preserved owing to their remoteness from modern populations. The isolation of the area allowed for these types of features because the Apache could return to these locations, assured that their caches remained untouched by outsiders.

Since discovery of the first ones on Otero Mesa, more of these storage platforms that were used by the Mescalero and Chiricahua Apache have been identified across the Southwest. Chronometric dates place them as early as the 1300s, providing evidence of an Apache presence three centuries earlier than is currently taught in college classrooms. Direct associations of these storage platforms with Apachean rock art and plain Apache pottery provide further substantiation of their cultural affiliation and evidence for understanding the earliest presence of the Apache in this region. These features have been instrumental in tracing the early presence of the ancestral Apache in the southern Southwest, a presence that may explain the abandonment of large tracts by ancestral Puebloans in the late prehistoric period. We are just learning how to identify uniquely Apachean evidence. Who knows what other secrets this landscape holds?10

**The Tigua Tribe of Ysleta Del Sur Pueblo and the Rancho de Ysleta Land Grant**

Many Tiwa, Piro, and Tomprio from Isleta Pueblo, the Salinas Pueblos, and the Rio Abajo region of New Mexico migrated south, some under duress, during the Pueblo Revolt in 1680. They became established as the Tigua Tribe and many resided at Ysleta del Sur Pueblo. An original town grant was given to the Pueblo of San Antonio de Ysleta in 1751 and was confirmed in 1825. By 1828 the Ysletans petitioned the governor of Chihuahua, Jose Antonio Arce, because those lands originally given them had been appropriated by others and placed under cultivation or grazing and so were insufficient for their needs. Governor Arce granted the pueblo a community pasture grant. This Rancho de Ysleta land grant, which consisted of 186 leagues or 823,608 acres of land, was laid out not to exceed an aggregate of one league of land for each family. Subsequently the grant should have constituted a valid claim guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, yet efforts by the then City of Ysleta to gain recognition of this title failed and the Tigua lost use rights to the Rancho de Ysleta grant. Their land claims include the Ysleta del Sur grant in Ysleta, Texas, as well as the more expansive Rancho de Ysleta Grant which extends from the Franklin Mountains eastward to the Guadalupe Mountains, south into northern Chihuahua, and north to Alamo Mountain and the Otero Mesa area.11

Tribal history recorded almost a century ago documents that the Tigua Indians were given more than 800,000 acres of West Texas land, seemingly in 1751, as a reward for their services in fighting raiding Comanches. Manuel Ortega, a cacique (headman or chief) at the time of his death in 1931, provided the following information during an interview: "A long time ago, many years before I was born, a party of Tiguas returning home from Carizal [Mexico], where they had gone to trade pottery, ran across a small detachment of Spanish soldiers whom they recognized as belonging to the San Elizario garrison."
After the usual greetings, they asked the Spaniards where they were going; the soldiers at first seemed embarrassed and answered evasively. But, after some vacillation, the leader said that they had been sent to Chihuahua with a number of Comanche Prisoners, and that during the rainstorm of the previous night, the Comanches had escaped; that fearing the punishment and disgrace which they felt was sure to follow; he and his soldiers had decided to desert and ‘lose’ themselves in the mountains.

The Tigua leader advised the soldiers to return to San Elizario and take the consequences of their misfortune “like men.” He added his pledge that he would “do all in his power to save them from punishment.” The Spaniards took his advice. Meanwhile, the Indians agreed to speak to the commandant at San Elizario on behalf of the soldiers and to offer to capture and deliver into his hands as many live Comanches as had escaped, provided he would not punish the soldiers.

“Thus agreed,” continued Ortega, “the party proceeded to the fort. When the commandant heard of the escape he became very angry, and at first refused to consider the proposition made by the Indians, but, finally after much storming, he decided to accept it.

The Tiguas reported the matter to their chief and explained it to their group at a council. The rest of the tribe agreed to help and so notified the commandant.

Not long afterwards a party of Comanches made a raid in the valley and drove off a number of horses and cattle,” he related. “Word was quickly passed to Ysleta, and a party of volunteers was immediately organized which, after assembling at the church for benediction, set out for San Elizario where they joined a company of soldiers.

Having ascertained the way the raiders had taken, the combined force set out rapidly across country in pursuit. They travelled two days, and, just as anticipated, at the close of the second day, the Comanches were discovered in camp. A plan of attack was immediately made. The camp was approached very quietly, and after carefully posting the soldiers at points of vantage, the Tiguas stole noiselessly upon the sleeping Comanches, and reaching the edge of the camp separated into groups of three, each group selecting a prospective prisoner.

At a given signal the Tiguas threw themselves on their sleeping victims and tied them hand and foot before they were fully aware of what was happening. The camp was immediately in an uproar; the surprised and terrified Comanches,
shouting wildly to each other, began running in all directions trying to escape, while the soldiers poured volley after volley into them.

Very few got away. Many were captured and many were killed. The pursuing party had not lost a man. A number of scalps were taken and nearly all the stolen stock was recovered, and the expedition returned in high spirits to San Elizario. More than double the number of captives promised by the Indians were delivered to the commandant, who, with all due solemnity issued his pardon to the delinquent soldiers, and graciously allowed them to continue in the service without loss of rank or pay.

I don’t know what they did with the prisoners. I suppose they sent them to Chihuahua; maybe they shot them, or maybe they kept them for exchange, quien sabe?

Shortly afterwards, in recognition of this singular service, the government granted the Ysleta Indians for their own use and enjoyment all these plains that lie north of the valley, including everything from the edge of the mesa to beyond Cerro Alto. We enjoyed the ownership of those plains and mountains for many years. We lost them, however, when I was yet a young man.

The title papers had passed successively from one chief to another, until ‘El Chapo’ Alvino Marquez succeeded to the chiefship; he received the papers from his predecessor, but, upon his death the papers could not be found. Our neighbors soon learned of the loss, and, denying our ownership, gradually usurped our rights. We protested for a long time, but finally becoming convinced that the government record had also disappeared, we ceased our claim and resigned ourselves to the loss.”

The aged chief recalled that great herds of antelope then roamed the plains. The Tiguas hunted them every year when cold weather began. Deer were plentiful in the foothills of the mountains and provided meat through the winter as well as buckskin. “But now,” he added nostalgically, “all that is gone, and when, the hunting season comes around, all we can do is to sigh and seek consolation in our memories!”

**TEXAS RANGERS AND THE BATTLE AT CORNUDAS**

The Texas Rangers, a law enforcement agency based in Texas functioned as a paramilitary force at the service of the Republic (initially in 1823, but officially 1835) with statewide jurisdiction in Texas. One scuffle at Corrudas Springs in 1877 resulted when J. A. Tays led five Texas Rangers on a mission across Otero Mesa to deliver cattle to the Guadalupe Mountain Ranch. They arrived safely but on the return trip they rode around a point of rocks and came face-to-face with ten or twelve Apaches using the water at Corrudas Springs. They were within forty feet of one another when they discovered each other’s presence. The Apaches scrambled to the rocks above the trail while five of the Rangers found cover in a nearby gully. Tays reported that the Indians:

“having a position in the rocks near the water [sic] and on our approaching they opened fire on us. I had no cover except a small water course about two feet deep. I was compelled to give back some 400 yards for shelter to an old [Butterfield] station. On the first attack they tried to surround us. [A]fter standing fire for some 10 minutes one of my men was KILLED and 2 Horses mine first.”

Though the Ranger killed, had “splendid cover…[he] stood upright according to…etiquette… and was shot through the brain.” Although four of the men had found safety within the walls of the old Butterfield stage station, another Ranger, exhibited the kind of cool courage in the face of danger that is only rarely exhibited:

“In reloading his Winchester after shooting it empty Loyd unfortunately slipped a .45 Colt’s pistol cartridge into the magazine of his .44 Winchester and in attempting to throw a cartridge into his gun it jammed, catching him in a serious predicament. However, taking his knife from his pocket the fearless ranger coolly removed the screw that held the side plates of his Winchester together, took off the plates, removed offending cartridge, replaced the plates, tightened up the screw, reloaded his gun, and began firing. It takes a man with iron nerve to do a thing like that, and you meet such a one but once in a lifetime…”

This event at the Corrudas Mountains on Otero Mesa—and its retelling—and others equally spellbinding are what built the legend of the Wild West and ensured a place in the pages of history for the Texas Rangers.
Salt War on Otero Mesa

The San Elizario Salt War, also known as the Salinero Revolt or the El Paso Salt War, began in the late 1860s as a struggle by local Anglo Texan businessmen to acquire title to the salt deposits on Otero Mesa at the foot of Guadalupe Peak. These dry salt lakes, since discovery by Governor Vargas in 1692, had for centuries been in the public domain and were accessed by local residents living on both sides of the Rio Grande. Local Mexican-Americans argued that continued public access was guaranteed by the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, in line with rights of community access granted by the King of Spain. Yet, beginning in 1866 the Texas constitution allowed individuals to stake private claims for minerals (including salt) a legal change which instigated the attempt to establish sole title to the salt beds. This privatization was attempted by leading politicians and supported by the Texas Rangers. Initial failure to gain sole title led to a 12-year feud that culminated in a siege and surrender of 20 Texas Rangers in 1877. This marks the only time in history a Texas Ranger unit ever surrendered to a local insurgency, which speaks to the commitment and scale of efforts by local residents to maintain their rights.

The San Elizario Salt War claimed fewer than a dozen lives but it holds its place in history owing to related and resulting events. As a result of the unrest, San Elizario lost its status as county seat, which was relocated to El Paso. The 9th Cavalry of Buffalo Soldiers were sent to reestablish Fort Bliss which had been abandoned earlier that year (1877), with the goal of calming the border violence and subduing the local Mexican-American population. Ultimately, the long-established community use of the salt lakes was lost to private ownership, leading to the economic and political marginalization of the Mexican-American community. In addition to wrestling economic and political power from the majority ethnic group, locals were subjected to robbery, assault, and murder forcing hundreds to flee south of the border.

Paleo-Indian at 28,000 to 40,000 years ago at Pendejo Cave

Otero Mesa has been at the center of many controversies, including those related to salt bed ownership, territorial boundaries, and access to life-giving spring water. But the current debate is of a different nature. Researchers claim to have uncovered evidence of human presence in the caves of Otero Mesa at between 28,000 and 40,000 years ago. Clovis hunters are known to have roamed the American Southwest and the American continent about 13,000 years ago. At the end of the Pleistocene they hunted mammoths and bison with their special weapons tipped with beautifully crafted stone lance heads. Yet, chronometric dates obtained from thick cave deposits on Otero Mesa may extend this presence back another 20,000 years or more! What other secrets will this mesa divulge?

Apache Encampments

There are few known sites where Apache encampments and rock art are found together. It is rare indeed to find hut outlines, pottery, stone tools, and rock art together that are indicative of this group. An Otero Mesa rock art location is one of the most important with respect to Apache representations, with exceptionally high concentrations and greater variation in expression and quality of craftsmanship than anywhere else. These associations with other types of material culture provide a rare glimpse into the past and a unique study location.
Ranches

Crumbled adobe walls and broken bottles and plates bespeak shattered dreams and defeat in the face of climatic conditions or human conflict. Ranchers took over this vast land in the latter part of the 1800s but many were soon removed as the military expanded. The remains of these hardscrabble attempts at ranching often show evidence of later use, by squatters finding refuge from the wind. Apaches using broken glass and metal for tools, and adventure-seekers who left their names carved in the adobe and plastered walls.

Trail of Time

On Otero Mesa we see history’s palimpsest writ large upon this vast landscape. There are some places so special that you suppose you can feel the ancestors sashaying on the wind, though you will see no one all day long. Not a soul. But for one’s soul the remoteness of the mesa can be breathtaking and exhilarating or calming and soothing; either way, most agree, it is healing. Sometimes it can be difficult to understand, to remember, how a wander through the wilderness can be so consoling. It’s like stepping into the past, allocating a healthy share of perspective to the moment, equalizing troubles on the winds of time.

Like geological stratigraphy a series of occupational periods are layered like a cake, one on top of another, forming a rich and varied chronological record of sequential use. Others are spread out across the 1.2 million acres of the mesa, each occupation, representing people of many backgrounds and ways of life, resting in a distinct location.

Paleo-Indians

Humans in the past, as well as the present, tend to return to places of value. Often the greater the value, the longer the occupational depth. We cannot say with certainty how long people occupied Otero Mesa but a very prominent archaeologist has published evidence of occupation between 13,000 to 40,000 years ago! Those who occupied Pendejo Cave, Pintada Rockshelter, and several other sites on Otero Mesa’s escarpment are called Paleo-Indians. They are the earliest known occupants of North America and so evidence of their presence is especially valued in the scientific community and among the public at large. Places with the human touch that are so old take on a special patina that primes the imagination and reminds us of how short our stay really is.

These Paleo-Indians would have sat on the mesa edge looking out across at the striking mountains at the margin of the sweeping valleys below. Perhaps they would have considered the route they and their families would take during the upcoming part of their seasonal round. They may have seen herds of oversized mammals that left fossilized footprints along the margin of nearby Lake Otero. Soon their gaze would turn to the mesa behind them, rich with the fauna that were so important to their way of life. The pronghorn were always difficult to take down without a communal drive that required many people. Instead, they focused on deer, but especially valued were the huge woolly mammoth and the bison. Both would feed the family for some time, especially when the meat was preserved for use through the winter. These stockpiles would also take care of social obligations, allowing neighbors to come together to share the bounty of the land and at the same time find mates for children coming of age.

Spear in hand, they would head off toward the east when the pink glow of sunrise was still radiant on the adjacent mountains. Women would gather plant foods along the way. Men would collect stone from known outcrops to craft specially made tools for use in processing the day’s proceeds. Each night they would camp where their travels took them, but always in locations they knew from past experience would fulfill their needs.
As the climate changed at the end of the Pleistocene the giant grazers were replaced with downsized mammal species, resulting in a broader spectrum hunting and gathering adaptation for the Archaic period. Changes in the species present prompted changes in hunting technology and strategies. Bison formed a substantial portion of the subsistence base for these hunters, as did bighorn sheep, pronghorn, deer, and numerous smaller species. The bison herds used by these early hunters continued to occupy areas of the Southwest well into the historic period, until commercial hunting and efforts to cut off the subsistence base of indigenous tribes brought them almost to extinction. Some of these bison herds originated in Mexico, migrating north seasonally to occupy the rich grasslands, such as those found on Otero Mesa. These herds were comprised of a smaller subspecies than those on the Great Plains and herd size was also smaller, accommodating the restricted patches of grasslands in the Chihuahuan and Sonoran deserts.

Bison hair and bones were found throughout the layers at Pendejo Cave, along the Otero Mesa escarpment, including in the latest or most recent strata. This and other rock shelters provide conditions suitable for preservation of remains that otherwise deteriorate on open sites, providing a rich record of what people ate. Evidence of bison is also sometimes found as bones in deep arroyo (wash) cuts and in cienega or marsh deposits or near springs where these animals would have been ambushed by natural and human predators. In other cases, bone beds of a hundred or more animals may be found where animals were corralled toward a human-made trap. These were formed by parallel drive lines, where stampeding animals were driven off a cliff or into an enclosure, killed, and then butchered. These kinds of activities required cooperation of large numbers of people working together, which means their nearby encampments would have been larger than the norm.

During the Archaic period the range of tools used increased as the subsistence base that was exploited broadened to include many more plants. By the end of this long period people were focusing more intensively on certain favored locations, so much so that they began to cultivate plants in the well-watered river valleys.

**JORNADA MOGOLLON**

One cannot help but think of ancestral spirits as a whirlwind skitters across terrain, pulling dust from the mesa floor and sending it to the heavens. The vibrant vortex disappears as soon as it appears, leaving thoughts of the fleeting nature of life. The Jornada Mogollon once lived here in greater numbers than their predecessors, but for a comparative moment in time. Their plain brown pottery that appears around AD 200 is masked by the rocky surface, while the pit houses that once sheltered the succession of daily activities are now buried by the centuries. The tools they used to hunt small game and forage for plants are found scattered on the surface, yet signs left more deeply buried indicate they had begun to cultivate and store the proceeds against future shortcomings.

Through time linear strings of broken pottery marked heavily used trails that brought travelers between large villages and into the adjacent mountains and valleys. Painted red and tri-color designs on broken ceramic jars provide an intriguing garnish that marks the breadth of their territory, as do geometric black-and-white designs. The more...
intricately painted pottery of neighboring peoples, including from Mimbres and Casas Grandes, tells of a growing interaction and spreading influence of these residents. Impressive room blocks of puddled adobe attest to the success of intensive farming and perhaps the need for defense. The bustle brought on by a greater number of villages and substantial population increase meant greater attention to the complexity of social and political matters. Yet by the 1400s all of these achievements that led to a thriving and sizable population gave way to a less intensive use of the landscape by fewer people.

NON-APACHES

By the time the first Europeans arrived they were describing small groups of fishers, hunters, and gatherers. Perhaps some were the scattered remnants of the Jornada Mogollon, while others seem to have arrived from elsewhere. Referred to as the Jano, Manso, and Suma, these small groups are barely perceivable on the terrain owing to an especially low-impact lifeway.

The Canutillo archaeological complex defines a series of occupations described by the first Europeans and Otero Mesa has its share of these sites. Rock art drawings that may be indicative of these non-Apache mobile groups are in evidence on Otero Mesa, representing the first known depictions made by these groups. This should be no surprise, however, because everyone in the prehistoric and historic past came to these remote mountains and this mesa.

Historically, Otero Mesa and the surrounding area was a cultural crossroads where Tigua, Piro, Tompiro, Jano, Manso, Suma, Comanche, Kiowa, Navajo, various Apache, and others converged along trails, at waterholes, in settlements. People have always moved around; but events in the historic period brought on by movements of Europeans and Comanches resulted in a complex social scene in the Greater Otero Mesa area. 19

History records simultaneous use of Otero Mesa by Apache and Tigua, although this runs contrary to Western notions of land use. Tigua use of Otero Mesa—as pasture land and the location of traditional gathering and ceremonial sites—has occurred both within and outside the prevailing political and economic structure of any particular era. The Tigua value Otero Mesa’s cultural landscapes that have remained largely undisturbed since the ancestors of the Pueblo of Ysleta del Sur entered the area. Otero Mesa provides an anchor for their cultural values and represents a tangible expression of their sacred affiliation. 20

APACHES

One or more of these mountains on the mesa is the location referred to by the Mescalero Apache place name Drawing on the Rocks. Here the rocks are dressed with pecked and painted depictions from deep in the imagination and shaped through life’s experiences. These captivating landforms and others across the mesa may have been a place where Apache people sought power. As spiritual leaders and inspiration seekers pecked sacred images into stone, they soon felt their efforts justified as thunder boomed and lightning cracked toward earth and a torrent of wind and rain appeared, evoked by the kindness of the wind gods. Ample evidence indicates that people through the ages came to Otero Mesa seeking refuge from social tensions and enemy pressure and in a quest for inspiration and connection.

From any place on the mesa the sun would have risen in the distance over Rock Nose, the Mescalero Apache name for El Capitan Peak at the south end of the Guadalupe Mountains. As today, the sheer limestone rock face of Rock Nose would have been washed by the sun, set aglow with pastel lavender, lilac, and purple.

Various groups of ancestral Apache (Faraone, Mescalero, Gila, Chiricahua, Lipiyan, Lipan, Siete Rios, and others) used the mountains and this remote mesa for safety when their enemies intruded into their homeland. To the south, in
the Hueco Mountains, lies the largest known Apache site, one, as it turns out, that was referenced by the Spanish in the late 1700s. Cerro Rojo has over 200 kuagha—brush structures used in the mountains before and later in lieu of skin tips [see CERR0 ROJO, above.] Other Apache encampments on Otero Mesa, such as the one at Where Two Flats Meet, clearly date to the nineteenth century. Their tipi and wickiup rings are clearly visible on the surface along with a mixture of stone and metal tools that attest to their use after the arrival of Europeans. Pottery from riverside mission settlements indicates that these Otero Mesa residents interacted in some way with the mission and presidio settlements, possibly raiding there or trading for manufactured goods. Later Apachean occupants of these Otero Mesa sites may have been groups who settled near the presidio in times of peace, receiving rations or, perhaps, they were refugees who fled during uprisings coming to these more remote locations.21

Leading their small group to a waterhole or a favored mescal collecting area, the Apache would have crossed Otero Mesa, perhaps storing crucial supplies in one of the many cave-caches known here [see APACHE CAVE CACHES, above.] At least one of these dates to the pre-Spanish period, providing crucial evidence of an ancestral Apachean presence in pre-European times.

EXPLORATIONS AND TRAILS

The first Spanish expedition through this region came through the Pass of the North in 1591 within view of Otero Mesa. Not long afterward, in 1598, don Juan de Oñate colonized New Mexico with 129 soldier-colonists and their families. Europeans subsequently used the Camino Real to access the northern frontier and Santa Fe. Less than a century had passed before Oñate’s colony was forced to flee south to El Paso from Santa Fe during the 1680 Pueblo Revolt. The Spaniards and indigenous allies found refuge in the El Paso area. While their settlements were along the fertile Rio Grande the indigenous occupants utilized the surrounding areas and the Spanish campaigned into hostile territory seeking enemy targets.

Exploratory trips through this land included Governor Vargas’ quest for salt in 1692 [see GOVERNOR VARGAS DRINKS CHOCOLATE, above.] Salt was necessary for life, for preserving meats, as well as a key element for processing silver ore. Many wars have been fought over salt, laws have been changed to accommodate the control of salt beds, and people have died along many a trail seeking it. As Vargas said, finding the rumored salt bed was necessary for El Otero. Many wars have been fought over salt, laws have been changed to accommodate the control of salt beds, and people have died along many a trail seeking it. Vargas’s party discovered a direct route from El Paso to this salt source, journeying for five days, a distance that today would take but a few hours. At the time this source was referred to by Vargas as the Apaché’s salina, owing to its position deep within uncharted and Apache-controlled territory. By the mid eighteenth century, as Texans wrestled control of this bed from the Apaches, it became known as the Guadalupe Salt Lakes.22

Later expeditions, such as Hugo O’Conor’s 1773 campaign against the Apaches brought him into the Guadalupe Mountains and across Otero Mesa. Others came to Otero Mesa in pursuit of Apaches in the Sacramento Mountains. Of course, many undocumented Apache jaunts crossed this mesa or had its springs, game, and medicinal plants as the destination.23

Following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican–American War in 1848, American surveyors, working for the U.S. government, sought a good road between Texas and various points west. Major Robert Simpson Neighbors, sent by the War Department in 1849, began exploring an Upper Road between San Antonio and El Paso, passing by the Ojo del Alamo (Spring of the Cottonwood) and Crow Flat. This road across Otero Mesa was “a well watered road traversing the country…formerly used for the transportation of Mexican troops.” The words he and others chose for their journals remind us of the awe this place inspired. Describing the Cornudas Mountains Captain Randolph B. Marcy’s 1849 report stated:

“This is another of those immense piles of loose rocks, which rising up almost perpendicular to the height of 500 feet out of the level gravelly plain, and utterly denuded of vegetation, presents a most strange and picturesque appearance, very different from any scenery we meet with in the settled parts of the United States.”

These journal entries also remind us of the danger and isolation and therefore the intrigue of the area. For example, in 1849 engineer Francis Bryan commented that “rattlesnakes and dog towns again appear in great numbers.” He and others found that the road was well marked by the passage of emigrant trains. Travelers through this wild terrain knew that dangers awaited them. For example, in 1892 before continuing on to Alamo Spring, Vargas sent a man ahead to reconnoiter to be sure the enemy was not camped there. and, after scouting out the Guadalupe Mountains, they saw someone on a high rise that seemed to be scouting out their camp. Marcy commented that the Cornudas Mountains were “a favorite place of resort for the Apaches, who come here when travelers are seen approaching, hide themselves in the caverns of the mountains, and rob them of their horses.” In 1854 Lieutenant Colonel Chandler, with 180 men, came through the same region seeking the Messaleno, who “had been infesting the road leading from El Paso to San Antonio, committing murders and robberies…” And emigrants between 1849 and 1850 reported deaths as a result of Indian attacks along this Upper Road across Otero Mesa.24

Words recorded by explorers also remind us of the blessing of cool drinkable water, a gift we take for granted, but which sustains life and ignites gratitude, especially after two days travel by horseback without water. In fact, the
initial Spanish discovery of the Guadalupe salt beds were repeatedly delayed because citizens and soldiers failed to identify water sources owing to their lack of knowledge of the land.

Reliable water drew people along this trail on Otero Mesa and while the route between may have varied, the places they stopped were consistent owing to the dependable presence of life-giving water. Thankful for making it between waterholes, explorers of the day, whether it was in the seventeenth or nineteenth century, never failed to be grateful for the springs and wells they encountered at Hueco Tanks, Alamo, Cornudas, Crow Flat, and in the bordering Guadalupe Mountains. At the Cornudas Mountains Marcy states they “found a well fifteen feet deep, filled to the top with beautifully pure water.” Bryan and Johnston are no less impressed: “Inside the mountain, in a cavern, there is a fine large well of pure water; this is full to overflowing; the water is very cold and of good flavor.”

John Russell Bartlett, U.S. Boundary Commissioner, visited Otero Mesa in November of 1850 during his survey of the boundary between the United States and Mexico. Otero Mesa fell within the disputed area. Bartlett noted the rock art on the slopes and rock faces of Otero Mesa stating: “Upon the faces of the rocks near were rude sculptures and paintings, made by the Indians.” Bartlett also noted a polish on the rock faces at the Cornudas Mountains that later would be attributed to ancient mammoths scratching their hides against the rock faces. 26

The Butterfield Overland Stage followed the route across Otero Mesa that was surveyed by Neighbors, Pope, and others along the 32nd parallel. Established in 1858 the Butterfield Overland Stage provided mail, freight, and passenger service between St. Louis and San Francisco, stopping at Crow Springs, Cornudas Tanks, and Alamо Spring stations on the Upper Road across Otero Mesa (see BUTTERFIELD, above.) As they traveled this trail the passengers along the Butterfield Trail did not know that the two million-acre Otero Mesa is the largest Chihuahuan Desert grassland in North America, although it may have seemed like it as they bounced across the rutted desert road. 23

Even in the eighteenth century when the Buffalo Soldiers crossed Otero Mesa they were following existing routes. Buffalo Soldiers of the Ninth Cavalry out of forts Davis and Stockton patrolled the San Antonio-to-El Paso road through the center of Otero Mesa. Congress had passed legislation on July 17, 1862 giving Black men the opportunity to join the Union Army. Fighting honorably in the Civil War and then in the post-Civil War period they served as part of the thin blue line in the western frontier. More than 12,000 Black Americans served in the Indian Wars carried out in the West, which represented a fifth of all troops assigned to this cause. Among them were several Medal of Honor winners who won their recognition for campaigns in New Mexico and Arizona. Cavalrymen escorted stages and guarded mail stations along this route, often being in the field for a month at a time while covering large territories, in one instance 500 miles, before returning to base. They were also tasked to tend to outlaws, rustlers, and horse thieves as well as search out and defeat the marauding Indians. Among these were the ancestors of the Mescalero Apaches who from their Guadalupe Mountain bases attacked stages, pack trains, and wagon trains, and raided liberally from cattle and horse herds (see BUFFALO SOLDIERS, above.) Two or three infantry men might be posted at stage stations for guard duty, as they were at the Cornudas Mountains, which was generally a peaceful and desired assignment except for the fact that the horses kept at the remount stations tended to attract raiders. Despite the hardships, the extreme monotony between the rare firefight, and the obstacles of prejudice and discrimination, these Black units had the lowest desertion and alcoholism rates in the army, and pride and morale within the regiments were high.

The Texas Rangers engaged the Apaches on Otero Mesa and took sides in the Salt War, losing this battle (see TEXAS RANGERS and SALT WAR, above). Yet the enduring legacy of the Texas Rangers was bolstered when they etched their names into the rocks at Hueco Tanks, which was the location of an 1881 fight between a company of Texas Rangers and Apaches from the Guadalupe Mountains. But what is unique about the Texas Rangers in this region is that those that patrolled Otero Mesa included Tigua Indians, both as rangers and scouts.30

RANCHERS

Juan de Oñate is often credited with bringing the first cattle into New Mexico in 1598 when he established New Mexico’s first European colony, yet cattle and other livestock accompanied the 1540-1542 Vázquez de Coronado expedition. It was not until much later, however, that Otero Mesa’s herds of pronghorn and deer were supplemented with herds of cattle and horses. In the 1700s the area around Cerro Alto Mountain was used by the Tigua as community pasture, but soon became privately held ranches. John Chisum and men of his breed made the cattle industry economically viable in this region in the 1860s and use of Otero Mesa for ranchland expanded after the 1862 Homestead Act and as the Apaches came under federal control. A number of sizable ranches occupied Otero Mesa. Among the most noteworthy were the land improvement efforts by Oliver Lee who partnered with Albert Bacon Fall—senator and of the Teapot Dome Scandal. Lee is remembered for his successful ranching ventures and his persistent attempts to develop a water control system across Otero Mesa. 31
ORETO COUNTY

Originally part of Mexico, in 1848 Colonel Steven Watts Kearny had claimed the area surrounding Otero Mesa for the United States. Otero Mesa remained in Texas until 1849 when this part of the state became New Mexico territory. In territorial days Otero County was originally part of Lincoln and Doña Ana counties, with Mesilla as the county seat. Lincoln County was formed in 1869 and until 1891 included nearly all of southeastern New Mexico, almost a fourth of New Mexico. This made it the largest county in the United States. At this time Lincoln County became famous for the Lincoln County War—a feud between factions, ranchers versus merchants. This late 1870s feud was as famous as the Hatfields and McCoys of Kentucky and Virginia, and the Earps and Clantons of Tombstone fame. The village of Capitan in Lincoln County is also the home of the original Smokey Bear, better known as Smokey the Bear. Lincoln County courthouse is where Billy the Kid made his last escape. Since 1873 the Mescalero Apache Reservation has been adjacent to and overlooks Otero Mesa, confining the Mescalero, Chiricahua, and the Lipan Apache to the 463,000 acre reservation. It was not until 1899 that Otero County was formed and was named after Miguel A. Otero who was appointed by President McKinley in 1897 and was the first Hispanic American to serve as governor. 32

It is best not to forget as we end this historical journey, however, that history is still being made here in the unfolding

Otero Mesa is cornucopia of cultural values writ large on an immense landscape. It has always been a contested landscape, which is why it looms so large in the American imagination. Otero Mesa is not merely a backdrop to history, but has been a driving force in how people interacted with one another, moved around the area, and wrestled with the land. Some went through the area as fast as their carriages would bring them, while others looked down from the surrounding heights observing. Others made pilgrimages to this area, staying as long as they could manage. Still others lived here, fully attuned to the extremes and subtleties that make this place what it is.

Like fine wine and fine art, Otero Mesa may be an acquired taste to those expecting masonry pueblos and forested slopes. Yet, the uniqueness of the cultural resources and the landscape in which they are set embody the qualities that make this place so important. Otero Mesa provides a distinctive experience and its boundaries protect unique resources.

On Otero Mesa the land conveys a simple beauty that is sometimes seen close up, in the brilliant detail of a crimson cactus flower, the finely painted pottery designs, and the colorful events of history. Other times attention is captivated by the almost endless panorama, flanked by deep shadows in the craggy canyons and golden expanses of grass billowing over low hills, cut by hidden arroyos. This grand unspoiled distance afforded by Otero Mesa’s remote placement provides perspective, drawing the mind to the meaningful, diverse, and remote history of the region.
EXCEPTIONAL QUALITY OF THE CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL RECORD

In many ways, the variety, quality, and importance of cultural sites on Otero Mesa is unmatched. How can we say this when there are grand ancestral Puebloan sites like Bandelier and Aztec Ruins national monuments? We say this unwaveringly because those long-protected Puebloan sites represent only a narrow sliver of the past. There is much greater temporal depth and a wider range of lifeways represented in the archaeological record than is expressed at those well-known sites and Otero Mesa has cultural resource sites that characterize this variation in significant ways.

With its stratified cave deposits, Otero Mesa has what may be one of the oldest locations of human occupation on the continent. These people did not build pueblos, but they crafted some of the most exquisite lance heads known in North America. They represent the first Americans and laid the stage for future occupation. They and many other people who inhabited this region left a much lighter imprint than sedentary farmers that have attracted so much attention, but their presence is no less important.

Without question, the range, quality, and importance of Apache sites on Otero Mesa are unparalleled. Fewer Apache sites are known overall than for many other groups who called this region home, which makes those Apache sites that are known all the more important. But beyond this, the Apache sites present here convey the unique qualities of this period, present associations not found anywhere else, and are exquisite examples of traditional artistic styles conveying age-old spiritual notions. Importantly, there are so few incredibly large Apache sites which makes the association of the huge Cerro Rojo site with Otero Mesa exceptional. Moreover, there is nowhere with greater densities of Apache rock art. One of the Otero Mesa rock art locations represents one of the most important Apache-related cultural properties known. Rock art is concentrated in a larger area than any other known location and shows a greater variation in expression and quality of craftsmanship. Moreover, highly unique features, such as Apache cave-cache platforms on Otero Mesa, provide a glimpse into the quality and variety of cultural properties present that make this place unusual. Furthermore, these specific features have been instrumental in providing evidence of the earliest Athabascan-speakers (proto-Apaches) in this region in the AD 1300s.

Additionally, the rock art on Otero Mesa provides rare glimpses into contemporaneous non-Apache peoples who have remained almost invisible. Some images seem as self portraits of these fishermen and hunters encountered by the Europeans in the 1500s. So little is known about these people, yet the food, advice, and friendship offered to the Spanish made the difference between colonization and failure, life and death. The Manso, Suma, and Jana were the cultural attachés who greeted the Spanish when they first stepped across the Rio Grande and their generosity and assistance made New Mexico possible. Otero Mesa provides a context to learn more about these people and their way of life.

Furthermore, Otero Mesa is one of the most sacred of places to the Mescalero Apache. The Tigua Tribe of Ysleta del Sur Pueblo also has a significant, long term, cultural, spiritual and historical affiliation with the landscapes of Otero Mesa. These are not recent associations but extend back to the time of their first presence in this region. Today, however, Otero Mesa has both renewed and special significance for indigenous Americans as a place of solace and reconnecting with their past.

Events occurred on and modifications were made to Otero Mesa that characterize people and organizations significant to American history. On Otero Mesa there is evidence of the first stages of historical interface between European and indigenous peoples. This is recorded in rock art of horses and riders, in the vestiges of battlefields at contested locations, in the oral traditions of local tribes, and in the pages of history. Otero Mesa’s saga is one involving extension of the American way of life west, the laying of the foundations for emigrant trails, a stage coach line, and railroad. It also authenticates important steps in equality for Americans in the changing role and reputation of Buffalo Soldiers and Tigua Texas Rangers, but the record here also conveys testimony about the inequalities of the past manifest in the Salt War, land grabbing, and gang-base feuds that changed fortunes and history. The American imagination of self and national identity started here.
These valuable and irreplaceable cultural resources are being placed in jeopardy. The added visibility of Otero Mesa from oil and gas exploration, mining, and recreational activity all contribute to the gradual attrition of the cultural record and sometimes the substantial modification of these resources. Apache sites, that are so special here, are especially susceptible to destruction. The aura surrounding Apache sites causes people to feel the need to have a piece of that history for their own and so they remove mementos. Apache sites are especially fragile as well, because their features are so ephemeral it takes little to completely destroy them, erasing them forever. Apache sites also contain fewer items than other sites and fewer Apache sites are known overall, making those that are known all the more important. Many of the sites on Otero Mesa exhibit a light footprint and so random bike trails and hiking routes irreparably destroy evidence, reducing their research value and cultural significance.

It is important to remember that while people have used this landscape for millennia, there are currently so many more of us and our destructive capabilities are so much greater than ever before. When the Butterfield company blazed a trail across the mesa they did not level a swath, but rather, the ruts of past trips and smoothest course determined the route. Today well pads are bulldozed with heavy equipment and permanent roads slash through the grassland with caliche caps that scar the mesa and exacerbate erosion, taking centuries to heal, if ever. When indigenous peoples extracted resources they collected what they needed, allowing plants to propagate for future use. When they built housing they piled a few rocks together to shield them from the elements. Today entire mountains disappear as miners search for rare earth minerals, irreparably changing the landscape. In the West, mountains are breathtaking constituents of the landscape, anchoring the sky and earth, providing a contrast that frames perspectives of our complex social world. In the past they were important sources of needed resources and spiritual attainment, and many cultural properties cluster here.

These cultural resources require protection because as greater numbers of people venture into this remote land they threaten to alter, remove, and destroy these extraordinary cultural properties on this incredible historical landscape. This is not an idle prediction, though the threats are both inadvertent and deliberate. Some of the rock art panels are so impressive that they are especially vulnerable. If not protected they will in all likelihood be defaced as visitors chip their own name into the rock along side or over the ancient’s sacred images. Regrettably it is common for looters to chip away entire slabs of rock art for sale to private collections. Elsewhere, metal detecting will remove evidence of battles involving Buffalo Soldiers and Texas Rangers. New trails will minimize the visibility of historic trails, initiate erosion, and contribute to the displacement and removal of important elements of the cultural record. It is time to protect this historical landscape.

**A FINAL NOTE**

“We need wilderness preserved—as much of it as is still left, and as many kinds—because it was the challenge against which our character as a people was formed” – Wallace Stegner

I invite you to visit this location to see and experience the deep history of one of New Mexico’s most enchanting landscapes.

We walk many of the same paths and cross the forgotten ruins of those who have gone before us. For those who are attentive, there are unmistakable signs, but for the lay public these can be easily missed because the imprint of past peoples was so much less obtrusive than today. The solution is co-use without destroying the reminders of past ways of life, education without altering, and enjoyment without destroying. Permanent protection of Otero Mesa will achieve these goals.
Dr. Deni Seymour is a leading regional authority on protohistoric and historic Native American and Spanish colonial archaeology and ethnohistory. For over 25 years she has studied the ancestral Apache, Sobaipuri-O’odham, and lesser-known mobile groups who were present at the same time. She has excavated two Spanish-period presidios and several indigenous sites of the period, works with indigenous groups in reconnecting with their heritage, and has rewritten the history of the pre-Spanish and colonial period southern Southwest. She has published extensively on these groups and this period, with more than 60 publications in referred journals, edited volumes, and popular venues, and has served as guest editor for journals. She has also authored three books. These include (1) From the Land of Ever Winter to the American Southwest: Athapaskan Migrations, Mobility, and Ethnogenesis; (2) Where the Earth and Sky are Sewn Together: Sobaipuri-O’odham Contexts of Contact and Colonialism; and (3) A Fateful Day in 1698: Archaeological Insights into the Remarkable Sobaipuri-O’odham Victory Over the Apache and their Allies. She received her doctorate and master’s degrees in Anthropology from the University of Arizona in 1990 and her Bachelor’s degrees with honors in both Anthropology and Environmental Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz in 1980. She has taught, was employed by a number of state and federal agencies, and has worked for a number of cultural resource management firms, including one she founded and oversaw. Now she is a full-time research archaeologist affiliated with two academic institutions and a nonprofit research group and serves on the boards of two non-profit organizations.

FOOTNOTES

1 Ysleta del Sur Pueblo, Tribal Resolution. 2008. Ysleta del Sur Pueblo Tribal Resolution TC-020-08, Permanent Protection of Otero Mesa’s Cultural Landscape and Cultural Resources from Oil and Natural Gas Drilling.

2 Basehart, Harry W., 1960. Mescalero Apache Subsistence Patterns and Socio-Political Organization: Sections I and II. A report of the Mescalero-Chiricahua Land Claims Project, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque. All Apache names presented in this document are from Basehart’s work.


Tigua Tribal Resolution, 2008.