

HISTORY OF VERMEJO PARK

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From the time Indians ruled the southwestern plains, men and events have shaped the unique history of the Vermejo country. Occupying about 480,000 acres of unspoiled wilderness in northern New Mexico, the Vermejo Park Ranch remains one of the largest blocks of privately owned land in the United States. Part of the Maxwell Land Grant, Vermejo retains qualities and remnants of its rich earlier history.

EARLY DAYS

Before the advent of white settlers or adventurers in New Mexico, Utes and Jicarilla Apaches roamed the valleys and parks of northern New Mexico's Sangre de Cristo Mountains. Though New Mexico was part of the land claimed by Spain in 1524, several hundred years passed during which Indians seldom encountered white men. In 1821 the Mexican government took charge of the land and retained the Spanish policy of awarding land grants in its new colonies; most of these were grants in New Mexico. Under Spanish rule the laws governing the grants had been vague and complicated, resulting in a serious land-grant problem. Mexico inherited this problem and caused its own complications by amending and repealing rules and regulations pertaining to land grants. Consequently, its grant policy was not consistent, and many pitfalls stood between the grants and their final confirmations.

BEAUBIEN-MIRANDA

During this period of inconsistent land-grant policy, Carlos Beaubien, a French-Canadian trapper who had become a Mexican citizen, and his partner Guadalupe Miranda, private secretary to Governor Manuel Armijo of Santa Fe, petitioned the governor for a land grant. In their petition, presented on January 8, 1841, they pointed out the need for the land to be "reduced to possession," so that its natural resources could be put to use. An influential factor in their attaining a grant was proof of their intention to colonize or cultivate the land. Three days after Beaubien and Miranda presented their petition, Governor Armijo answered it, granting them the requested land to be put to good use. They did nothing to reduce the land to possession and ownership for two years. Then, on February 13, 1843, they asked Taos Justice of the Peace Don Cornelio Vigil to sign an order promising them possession of the granted land, which he did. A document, dated February 22, 1843, was drawn up and signed by Vigil, stating that he had marked the boundaries of the Grant in accordance with Beaubien and Miranda's description of the land in their original petition and that he declared the partners to be in full possession of the land.

Father Antonio José Martínez actively resisted the Grant on the grounds that the lands should be opened to the poor people and not granted in large tracts to the wealthy. He filed papers in Santa Fe contesting Beaubien and Miranda's right to land that, he said, rightfully belonged to the people who had for generations grazed their livestock on it. On February 27, 1844, after an investigation into its terms, Governor Don Mariano Chávez suspended the rights of Beaubien and Miranda to the Grant. The partners attempted to prove that the poor people had no objection to the Grant and pointed out some

benefits that would come from their cultivation of the land; they thus appealed to the legislature for reinstatement of their claim to the Grant. On April 18, 1844, the assembly sustained their claim.

When the American army invaded New Mexico in 1846, Miranda fled with Governor Armijo to Mexico while Beaubien remained in Taos, becoming loyal to the United States. Along with the new territory, the United States inherited the land-grant problems. Large tracts of land had been granted to many citizens, such as Beaubien and Miranda, under ambiguous, complex laws, and many of the land-tract boundaries were vague. The United States agreed to protect the property rights of the citizens when it took over New Mexico, and thus tried to interpret the old laws and determine definite boundaries. Congress hired a surveyor to study the claims, report on their legitimacy and confirm valid claims. The Beaubien and Miranda Grant was confirmed in this way in 1857, but controversy over this Grant and others continued for several decades.

MAXWELL

Lucien B. Maxwell, pioneer, explorer and adventurer, became involved in the affairs of the Beaubien and Miranda Grant when he married Luz Beaubien, daughter of Carlos Beaubien and one of the heiresses to his interest in the Grant.

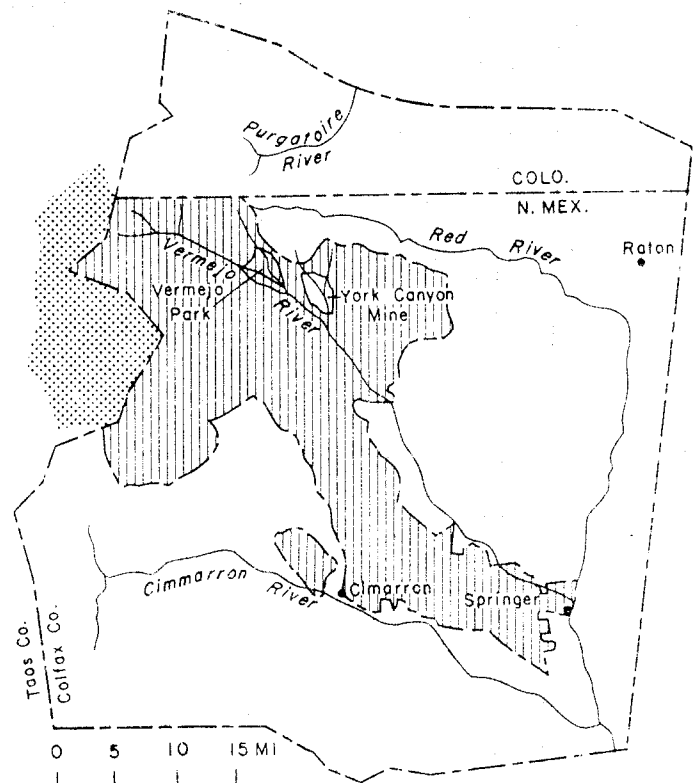


Figure 1. The Maxwell Land Grant. The hatched area shows the part of the Vermejo Park Ranch lying within the Grant boundary; the stippled area shows the part of the ranch acquired outside the Grant.

Beaubien turned over the management of his share of the Grant to Maxwell, who moved onto the Grant, settling at Rayado in 1849. Miranda, no longer interested in land in New Mexico, sold his share of the Grant to Maxwell. After Beaubien's death in 1864, Maxwell bought out all other heirs to the property, thus acquiring the rest of the Grant. By 1865 Maxwell and his wife had become sole owners of what by that time was being referred to as the Maxwell Land Grant, which encompassed 1,714,765 acres. The Grant included the town sites of Springer, French, Maxwell, Otero, Raton, Vermejo Park, Ute Park and Elizabethtown in New Mexico; and in Colorado, Virgil, Stonewall, Torres, Cuerto, Tercio, Primero and Segundo.

Maxwell's residence, renowned throughout the area as large, lavish and extravagant, became a principal stopping point on the Santa Fe Trail and a base for hunters, trappers and prospectors. Maxwell loved gambling, drinking and entertaining; and the rooms in his house reflected his tastes—a gambling room, a billiard room, a dance hall and a huge dining room for the men. Women were not allowed into these rooms; their quarters were in the rear of the house.

Maxwell's relationships with people he knew to be living on his land were peaceful, and in many instances he developed working relationships with them (Miller, 1962, p. 272).

"He started many a small rancher in the stock business, giving him a herd of cattle, sheep, or horses and a small ranch to be run on shares. The agreement was always a verbal one and sometimes two or three years would pass without a division. Then, when Maxwell needed more stock, hay, or grain to fill his government contracts, he would call in his shareholders, ask for an accounting, always verbal, and direct them to bring in the surplus to him, which was done without question."

Also living on Maxwell's land were people whose ancestors had built homes and ranches and who, for generations, had grazed their livestock on the land and cultivated it without ever having heard of Beaubien, Miranda, or Maxwell. These people undoubtedly believed that they were the owners of the land. Settlers from the East had also moved in and settled on the Grant, hoping to establish homesteads. These people too thought they were entitled to the land upon which they had settled.

Gold was discovered on the Maxwell Land Grant along Willow Creek in 1866. When its presence became known the following year, a rush of prospectors invaded the area and mining camps were established. Elizabethtown sprang up and gold was found along many of the creeks and on Baldy Mountain as well; the surrounding area became a frenzy of mining activity. Placer mining spread into what is now part of the Vermejo Ranch, but most of the gold mining activity on the ranch occurred between 1890 and 1900, when La Belle flourished as a mining town. La Belle, along with most other camps and mines, was abandoned about 1900 because of the low grade of the ore.

The discovery of gold on the Grant came as no surprise to Maxwell, as he had known of its existence for some time. The rush of prospectors and mining camps brought by the gold discovery, however, prompted him to invest in gold mining. Shortly afterward Maxwell sold the Grant, for reasons that are still uncertain. According to some references, including Keleher (1975), Maxwell's investments in gold mining were a failure. Other references are vague about his reasons for selling and suggest that Maxwell was still quite wealthy at the time of the sale. Pearson (1961) contended that Maxwell made a

decent profit from his investments in gold mining, but sold the Grant because of outside pressures to sell and because the management and control of the Grant had become a burden. Big businesses had begun looking into the Maxwell Land Grant after hearing that gold had been discovered on the Grant and that great coal, lumber and mineral potential existed, in addition to the grazing and farming possibilities.

ENGLISH CONTROL

Operating for an English syndicate, three financiers obtained an option to purchase the Grant from Maxwell in 1870 for a reported sum of \$1,350,000 (Pearson, 1961). Maxwell sold the Grant, and after a brief unsuccessful banking venture in Santa Fe and several other financial reverses, he returned to ranching at Fort Sumner and lived there until his death in 1875.

The English syndicate formed the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Company, which soon made an effort to remove squatters from the land by politely informing them that they were on Grant land and asking them to leave. Those who had lived on the Grant for many years with only Maxwell's verbal consent became irate at now being asked to leave by foreign absentee landlords. The Spanish and American people living on more remote portions of the Grant, who thought they owned their land, could not understand why they were being asked to leave. Many did leave, but others vigorously resisted. Anti-Grant sentiment grew strong and men throughout the area took up the cause, some with the aid of Winchester rifles and Colt revolvers. This period of violence, directly related to the problem of land title, became known as the Colfax County War. Conflicts continued—on the lands with gunfights and in the courts between Grant men and anti-Grant men. Lives were sacrificed with few repercussions until a minister, F. J. Tolby, known to sympathize with the squatters, was murdered. He became a martyr to the anti-Grant cause; and another minister, O. P. McMains, took up the cause. He displayed renewed vigor and published an anti-Grant newspaper filled with fiery editorials on the Grant situation.

DUTCH CONTROL

Within five years after purchasing the Grant, the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Company was bankrupt, even unable to pay salaries and 1874 taxes. Debts mounted and the situation worsened for several more years, until foreclosure proceedings were initiated in 1879. In 1880 the Maxwell Land Grant Company was formed under the laws of the United Netherlands, and the Grant came under control of a Dutch group that included several wealthy American industrialists. Financial problems continued to plague the Company and anti-Grant sentiment increased.

In 1885 the pro-Grant faction prevailed upon Governor Lionel A. Sheldon to authorize the organization of a company of National Guards to control the situation. News leaked out that Jim Masterson, brother of gunfighter "Bat" Masterson from Dodge City, was to lead this company of militia and that these men intended to kill. This news aroused the anti-Grant men, who went to the governor and convinced him to have the militia disbanded; this action, in turn, angered Masterson and the Grant men. Grant-related violence raged on, and the Dutch Company's financial situation worsened, necessitating a reorganization that was finally completed in 1888 (Pearson, 1961). The preceding year, the case of the United States vs.

The Maxwell Land Grant Company had gone to the Supreme Court and been decided in favor of the Company. The settlers and squatters were forced to abandon hope of ever obtaining legal rights to the land upon which they lived. At this point most of the squatters left, and the Maxwell Land Grant Company sold land to some of the remaining squatters.

BARTLETT

In 1900 William H. Bartlett, a wealthy grain operator of the Chicago firm of Bartlett, Frazier, and Company, and one of the five men who cornered the Chicago grain market at the turn of the century, began negotiations to purchase a large tract of land from the Maxwell Land Grant Company. Bartlett had first looked into property in the Southwest because his younger son, William H., Jr., had tuberculosis and doctors had suggested that the southwestern climate could help his condition. In 1902 Bartlett purchased 205,000 acres of Grant Land including Vermejo Park. He made an agreement allowing him to withhold the last payment to the Maxwell Land Grant Company until all squatters on the land had been removed: "They are given two years to get the Mexicans off and I hold back \$10,000" (letter to H. W. Adams, March 25, 1902).

At that time there was, and had been for generations, a predominantly Mexican settlement along the banks of the Vermejo River south of the present Park area. All of the families in this area were squatters on Grant land. The land supported crops and cattle, and many families tended small orchards. A little community existed in the 1880's that included a store, a church and even a small school. The close-knit nature of the community is illustrated by the *Springer Stockman* newspaper, July 6, 1883 edition, which reported on a Fourth of July party on the Vermejo: "At Vermejo Park the settlers up there had quite a celebration in the old fashioned way. The exercises consisted of singing, reading of the Declaration of Independence, speech-making, a basket dinner, and a big dance in the evening. Several parties from Raton went up there, but as they have not returned, it is impossible to give a full report of the good time had" (Stanley, 1952, p. 221). Apparently many of these squatters would not leave, so when Bartlett took over he let some of them remain and put them to work. Adobe ruins visible today along the Vermejo River from just below the Park area all the way downriver to the site of Dawson are the only evidence of the ranches that belonged to these squatters.

After buying the land, Bartlett built most of the buildings that make up the present Vermejo Park area. Casa Minor, the first residence built for the Bartletts, was completed in 1903. The second mansion, which was the largest and was situated between the two mansions remaining today, was begun shortly afterward. This mansion contained a huge kitchen and dining room and 27 bedrooms. In 1908 Bartlett began what is now called Casa Grande. The largest room was a library, 60 ft long by 30 ft wide, to house his collection of books, numbering more than 10,000 volumes. The house had 18 rooms: a kitchen but no dining room, a sunporch, six baths, and several bedrooms. Casa Grande became known as Bartlett's house; Casa Minor, his son Willy's house; and the center one, his son Norman's, used mainly for guests.

Although Bartlett did not move his residence to the ranch until July of 1910, his sons lived there continuously from 1903. The elder, Norman, first took charge of the lumber, which was only cut as ranch needs dictated. Later he was

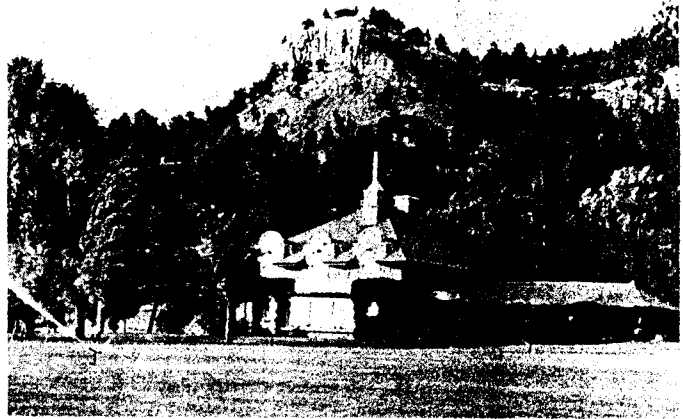


Figure 2. Casa Minor, completed in 1903; the first mansion built by W. H. Bartlett, owner of Vermejo Park. The pavilion sits atop a cliff in the upper left.

trained by H. W. Adams, Bartlett's cattle manager and owner of a part of the interest in Vermejo. Norman took over Adam's position when Bartlett bought out Adam's interest in Vermejo in December 1917. Bartlett's younger son, Willy, who lived at Vermejo with his wife, Virginia, was Postmaster of Vermejo.

Bartlett, an avid fisherman, developed and named Adams, Bartlett, Merrick, Bernal, Munn, and Marys Lakes, stocking most of them with various types of fish, such as he mentioned in his March 19, 1909, letter to the Bureau of Fisheries: "I have two more lakes that are disconnected from the trout streams, in which I would like to put some black bass, yellow perch, some croppies and some walleyed pike." Only trout remain in the lakes, the other fish could not spawn and died out. Bartlett built cabins by many of the lakes, in which he and his friends stayed occasionally.

Bartlett built Costilla Lodge as a fishing and hunting lodge, and often took his good friends and frequent visitors there to stay. Among them were Noel S. Munn, for whom Munn Lake was named, and George P. Merrick, whose name was given to Merrick Lake and to "Merrick's ranch" which Bartlett built nearby.

Bartlett operated a coal mine in Spring Canyon, which supplied the ranch needs and heated the houses. The mine had coal carts that ran on tracks; the mine entry, air shafts, weigh house, and related buildings still stand in Spring Canyon at the north entrance to Vermejo Park.

First hand accounts of life as a worker on Bartlett's ranch describe it as happy and peaceful. Bartlett built a store, a schoolhouse that was attended by 65 students, a coal-fired electric power plant, a fish hatchery, an ice house, a smoke house and greenhouses, in addition to the residences built for the ranch employees. Many parties and dances were given for his friends, and his workers were welcome to join in many of them. The pavilion on the cliff above Casa Minor is said to have been the site of some of Bartlett's parties, and the place where name bands and orchestras played, "filling the park with music." Annual Christmas parties included a huge Christmas tree in the library of Casa Grande, and Bartlett provided gifts for all the children and employees on the ranch.



Figure 3. The Guest House (Norman's House), containing 27 bedrooms. It burned to the ground in 1955 after being remodeled by W. J. Gourley. Photograph courtesy of Mrs. Evelyn Drake, Vermejo Park, New Mexico.

At the same time that Bartlett was developing this magnificent ranch, lumber camps and mining towns were growing up in the surrounding parts of the Grant land. In 1907 T. A. Shomberg, an associate of the Maxwell Land Grant Company, formed the Continental Tie and Lumber Company. He offered to sell Bartlett one-fourth interest in the venture, but Bartlett declined. The Cimarron and Northwestern Railway Company was formed as a subsidiary. Originally, the plan was to build a railroad from Cimarron into the new logging towns on Ponil Park and on up to Van Bremmer Park, with branches to surrounding timber areas (now all within Vermejo Ranch boundaries). After completion, the railroad ran from Cimarron up North Ponil Creek to Ponil Park. It looped around at Bonito, but never reached Van Bremmer Park. The logging business around these towns flourished for a long period, supplying lumber for mines in the Raton vicinity, cross ties for the railroads and timber for the buildings. The timber supply in the area began dwindling around 1920, the last railroad

tracks were pulled up in 1923, and the logging towns were abandoned.

Bartlett was still making improvements on the ranch when he died suddenly of heart trouble on December 10, 1918. Both of Bartlett's sons died soon after—Norman on September 5, 1919, and Willy on January 5, 1920. In the words of John Brewer, a former cow foreman at the Vermejo Ranch, who knew the Bartletts personally, "They had ever'thin' they was to have and they did ever'thin' they was to do; then they all up and died" (oral communication, 1963). The estate was left to Willy's widow, Virginia.

VERMEJO CLUB

In 1926, Virginia Bartlett and her second husband, Robert H. Doulton, sold the ranch to Harry Chandler, of the Los Angeles Times Mirror, and others who formed an elite hunting, fishing, and recreational retreat known as the Vermejo Club. Membership in the club was by invitation only, and the cost for a lifetime was \$5,000. The limited membership of the Vermejo Club was "carefully selected from men worth knowing who have been prompted to give it countenance by their sympathy with its ideals and their confidence in its purpose" (Vermejo Club, 1926, p. 33). Members included William Banning, Max C. Fleischmann, Will H. Hays, Herbert Hoover, Thomas W. Warner, Harvey Firestone, Cecil B. deMille, Douglas Fairbanks, Mary Pickford, and Andrew Mellon. In this remote mountain hideaway, hunting was a popular sport and a favorite source of food. According to Elliott Barker, New Mexico State Game Warden, who spent 1930-31 working for the Vermejo Club, "The elk were the most spectacular and important game on the area, but not the most plentiful, for deer greatly outnumbered them. This elk herd has perhaps attracted more attention than any other in the state because it was the first introduced and established after the species had been exterminated over the entire state in the early 1890's" (Barker, 1946, p. 188).

The natural setting and relaxation from everyday stresses and strains were emphasized in the promotional book printed by the Club. Every effort was made to preserve the unpol-



Figure 4. Casa Grande. Began for Bartlett in 1908.



Figure 5. Bartlett (upper) and Adams (lower) Lakes, developed by Bartlett for scenic and fishing enjoyment.

luted, untouched wilderness aspect of the ranch. The mansions that Bartlett built were used as guest houses and club houses. A pool table in Bartlett's library and the tennis courts on the mansion grounds were available to members' use, and a landing field was built on club property. Members could come and camp, stay in one of the isolated lodges, or enjoy the wilderness free from its hardships by staying at the headquarters and engaging in a variety of activities there.

The Vermejo Club promotional book summed up what a membership entailed (Vermejo Club, 1926, p. 13):

"A life member is entitled to all of the privileges of the club for himself and all dependent members of his family, who are at liberty to visit the club at any time as though it were their own estate. They have at their disposal the Club headquarters with its luxurious buildings, its adjoining comfortable cottages, or the various outlying hunting lodges and camps, and they may in addition, at a nominal rent of \$5.00 per year, secure building sites for hunting lodges or camps of their own at any point which will not interfere with the general enjoyment of the property by its other members."

William Banning chose the latter option and built Banning ranch on Leandro Creek near Merrick. Harry Chandler's lawyer and close friend, W. T. Cresmer, was given a building site and surrounding land near Leandro Creek at the foot of Ash Mountain, where he built Cresmer Lodge in 1929. The ruins of Banning's and Merrick's ranches give some idea of the elaborate facilities that existed in this wilderness playground.

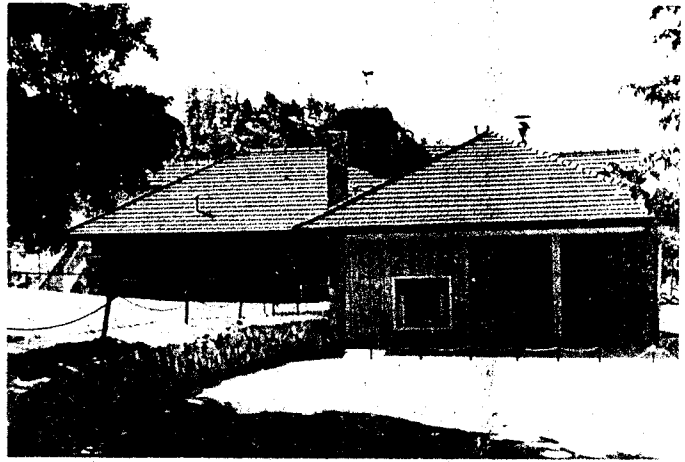
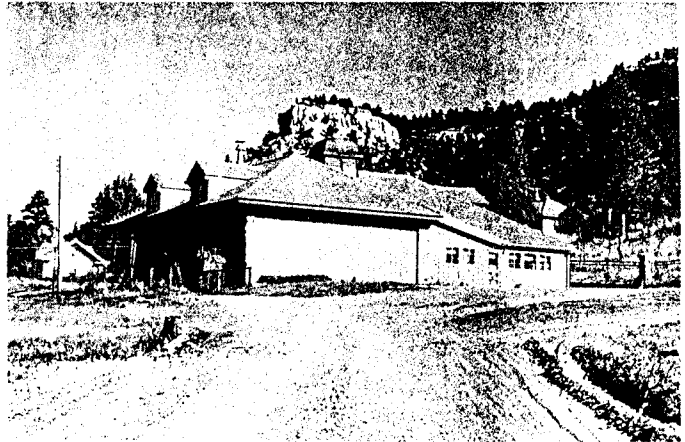


Figure 6. The "Stables." Gourley converted Bartlett's personal stables into an elegant dining room for ranch guests. The "Stables" are shown from the rear in the upper photograph and the front in the lower photograph. The pavilion is on the top of the cliff in the background.

Literally thousands of discarded bottles that had contained imported wines, fancy Hungarian mineral water, a variety of beers, and other unidentified liquids were found in the dump at Merrick's ranch, along with such exotic things as oyster shells!

The Vermejo Club, unable to sustain its membership when the depression hit, disbanded. In an effort to preserve the club, Harry Chandler and one of his family corporations, the Southwest Land Company, took over the land and leased it to Ira Aten to raise cattle. The mansions were closed down, and the ranch operations continued under Aten for several years.

GOURLEY

W. J. Gourley, a Fort Worth industrialist who founded the American Manufacturing Company of Texas, manufacturer of oil-field equipment and munitions, began purchasing land in the Maxwell Grant area in 1945. He first purchased 108,000 acres adjacent to the Vermejo Park land from the W. S. Land and Cattle Company, together with 3,300 head of cattle. In July of that year, he applied for a lease on land in the Ponil and Van Houten area, which contained 90,000 acres adjoining his ranch. He was granted the lease for 10 years and later exercised an option to purchase it for \$4.00 an acre. Then on

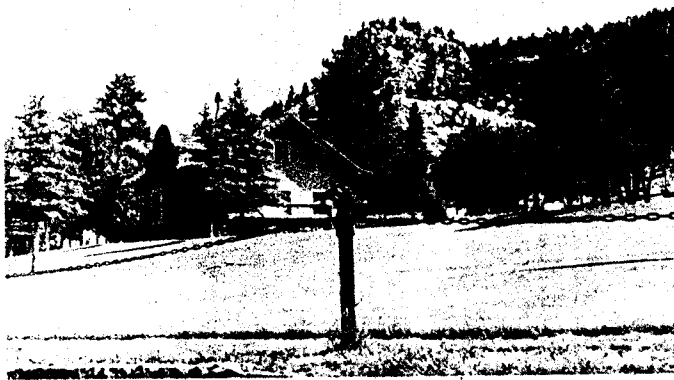


Figure 7. Guest houses. Gourley had the employees' stone cottages remodeled to accommodate fishing and hunting guests.

October 14, 1948, Gourley bought the Southwest Land Company's Vermejo Ranch property. "Within a few years he became owner of thousands of adjoining acres, most of it in Colfax County, some in Taos County, and a little in Costilla County, Colorado" (Pearson, 1961, p. 276). Gourley put together the largest single tract of land carved from the Grant. He maintained a thriving cattle business on the ranch and installed cowboys at headquarters and outlying cow camps to care for the cattle. For several years Castle Rock Park was the location of the main cow camp, as it had been in the past.

Big-game hunting became an important part of the ranch operation, and Gourley tried to enlarge the herds. In 1957, he purchased several hundred elk from Yellowstone National Park at \$5.00 each and had them trucked to the ranch. He kept them in the "Elk Trap," a pasture enclosed by a high ten-strand barbed wire fence, and released them after they grew accustomed to their new surroundings. Hereford cattle and a small buffalo herd now graze in that pasture. Gourley also purchased and raised wild turkeys at the park area in the 1960's. He carefully protected the young birds from marauding predators and then released the full-grown turkeys to roam the ranch.

After purchasing the property, the Gourleys re-opened the mansions, Casa Minor was remodeled for their residence during their visits. They began a guest operation in 1952, and

remodeled the middle mansion into 35 guest rooms with baths, but it burned to the ground on December 23, 1955. Little was salvaged, and the rubble was plowed under the ground. The guest operation closed down for a year after the fire. Mrs. Gourley had Bartlett's personal stable converted into the "Stables," a large kitchen, bar, and dining area, and had the adjacent stone cottages remodeled to accommodate guests. Vermejo opened for business again for the summer fishing season of 1957. When Casa Grande was remodeled for the Gourleys in the early 1960's, Casa Minor was also converted into guest accommodations. A house originally built for Adams, Bartlett's cattle manager, was used as the ranch headquarters; Ken Orr, ranch manager during Gourley's ownership, had his office there and a cook house was located in the rear of the building, where the ranch hands were fed. The store, originally built by Bartlett, was operated for ranch employees until it burned down in the late 1950's.

Gourley improved the ranch lakes and stocked them with large trout to entice fishermen. He organized and built a network of diversion ditches to utilize spring run-off in filling the lakes, greatly increasing their recreational potential. Gourley restored and re-opened existing hunting lodges at Cresmer and Costilla, and built Shuree Lodge on Middle Ponil Creek.

PENNZOIL

In August 1970, Gourley died of a heart attack at the age of 81. The ranch was put up for sale for 26.5 million dollars and remained in Mrs. Gourley's possession for three years, during which time the National Park Service, the United States Forest Service, the State of New Mexico and several private interests attempted to purchase it. In August 1973, Pennzoil Company purchased the entire Vermejo Ranch from Mr. Gourley.

Under Pennzoil control, Vermejo has continued as a working ranch, and the guest operation has been expanded. A new office was built in 1975 near the mansion area, and the old headquarters' office now houses departmental offices, such as fish and game, forestry, and cattle management; the cook house still remains in the back section.

Although Vermejo Ranch is only a fragment of the original Maxwell Land Grant, it remains one of the largest privately owned blocks of land in the United States today. From the days of Beaubien and Miranda through Maxwell, the Dutch, Bartlett, the Vermejo Club, and Gourley to the present-day corporate ownership of Pennzoil, Vermejo has catered to an exclusive few and remained private to the general public.

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