

Rea Homestead, V2.2

By Torrance County Archaeological Society

The Story of EL BOSQUE

By Jo Moore

The western slope of Bosque Peak beckoned to Archibald and Alice Rea as they nurtured their young family at Isleta Pueblo. The Reas, he a trader with the Isletas and she last century's equivalent of a nurse practitioner to the Isletas weren't the first to be tempted by the majesty of this mountain, nor were they the last. But the Rea family's century-old legacy carved a permanent verbal petroglyph in the rimrocks of the Manzanos . . . a story so enduring that the locals still tell it today, as if it happened only yesterday.

Like most tops-of-mountains, El Bosque is a powerful spot. But its power is intensified by the fact that someone - a family with a farm - once lived there on the top. Toddlers grew up to have children of their own, born on the mountain's top. People lived, and people died there. Generations passed, until death brought on its demise.

It was 1890 when Archibald and Alice Douglass Rea surrendered to the power of the mountain. Alice's brother, Ambrose Douglass (a Gallup mining engineer), was the first to file the original homesteading claim on the 320-acre mountaintop. But Douglass soon found his energies spread too thin . . . it became impractical to build a homestead and continue his work around the state. It was decided his sister Alice and her husband, Archibald, together with their small children, Fred, age 3, and Alice, age 1, would prove-up to the claim.

It was no small task to understand a cultured and academically-oriented English-born Irishman from Liverpool (who was educated at Brighton School of England) and his dignified wife and babies, carving out a life on the top of a mountain. But it was the top of the world for Archibald and Alice with its never-ending wind whipping over the mountain from the west, the intense high altitude sun, the unhampered sunrises and sunsets, and the endless vistas - a panoramic view in every direction of the Rio Grande, the Estancia Valley, the Jemez, Sandia and Sangre de Cristo Mountains to the north, and the Chupaderas to the south. Living on El Bosque would provide a chance for silence and solitude, an opportunity for introspection. From the summit the family would witness winter storms building and breaking below, watching the lightning of summer thunderstorms striking randomly, and experience the never-thawing deepfreeze of Mother Earth. And it was an opportunity for renewed health for Archibald Rea chance to recover from his chronic rheumatism.

Jerry Whitman, who grew up on El Bosque from a baby, writes of his Uncle Archibald in his "Recollections": When the final time came for them to move up there, Archibald's illness had progressed so severely before they could leave their Isleta home that he had to be carried clear to the top of the mountain on a stretcher (probably by Isleta Indians).

It was nearly the turn of the century, a time when every task was accomplished with human energy and with the help of a horse, burro or mule, if you were lucky. The Reas ascended the mountain enthusiastically and no doubt idealistically, made a home for themselves in a tiny cabin built of white aspen logs, with a hand-split shake shingle roof, the ruins of which survive to day.

There is no road to the top of Bosque Peak, not even a wagon trail. But there once was, at least for two or three years.

Writes Jerry Whitman: . . . [Archibald], with a crew of seventeen Pueblo Indians, built a wagon road down from the top of the mountain east to the nearest other wagon road at the foot of the mountain in Tajiique Canyon. This explains how later the Reas got a large roll-top desk and a heavy, large iron kitchen stove and other heavy and bulky furniture up there. That was a puzzle to many people how those monstrous articles got on the mountain top, not knowing about the road because it was soon obliterated by washouts and overgrowth. But this was jokingly held as a secret by the Reas.

Otherwise, the path to the alpine homestead was by three steep and primitive trails well-suited to the sure and steady hooves of the low-to-the ground burros which carried the burdens for the Reas to and from the valley.

It was apparent more was needed for survival on the top of El Bosque than just enthusiasm, idealism and the union of their small family. Seeds, livestock, tack, wagons and farm equipment were essential if the adventure was to continue - if life was to continue. Alice Rea volunteered the ultimate sacrifice - she would go back down, this time to Albuquerque, to earn enough money to buy the provisions needed to sustain life on El Bosque. The ailing Archibald would stay, the job of educating the children resting with him. Well-prepared and well equipped for both of their respective positions, Alice and Archibald did what was necessary to survive.

Alice was gone nearly a year, devoting her professional dressmaking talents to sewing elaborate gowns for the wealthy of Albuquerque. Archibald, with his well-stocked library (to which he devoted an entire room of the log cabin), educated the children in literature, the arts, math, the sciences, history and music (he was an accomplished violinist).

When she returned, Alice brought with her (from Jerry Whitman): . . . one milk cow with calf, one horse and a mule and four burros and seeds and plows to commence this first farming venture.

It was an investment of twelve months that would continue to pay for the remainder of her life.

In 1902 The Rea clan grew. Alice's sisters, Flossie, Eva (who would later marry anthropologist Charles Lummis), and newly-widowed Annie Douglass Whitman (along with her five children, Alice, Lilley, Hebe, Flossy and Jerry) joined the family in their mountaintop paradise. Archibald continued educating the children, now seven altogether, while the ranch expanded. Annie Whitman later married Willy Dow of Tajiique, the original Tajiique merchant. She descended to the east for Tajiique and their little store, leaving the children in the capable care of her sister and brother in-law to be educated not only in books, but life's experience as well.

The ranch prospered. Crops grew well in the rich mountain soil. Jerry Whitman writes, "The soil was very fertile and would grow most any short season crop to maximum size and quality."

Livestock increased to 160 head of cattle and 500 goats for milk and meat. The family's cash crop was potatoes, 15,000 pounds of them, 1,000 of which they kept for home consumption and seed. "The shipments down the mountain trail were made on burro and horseback to the awaiting merchants' wagons at the foot, and it took about fifteen of such trips." The Reas traded their excess crops for groceries, clothes and fruit from merchants and farmers along the Rio Grande. Butter, 25 to 50 pounds packed in one-pound square boxes covered with water-soaked canvas to keep it cool (invented by Fred Rea), was packed down the west slope to the Rio Grande twice each month.

It was a time of abundance and prosperity, a time to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Friends flocked to the mountaintop retreat to partake in the famous Rea hospitality and fellowship. The family scrapbook and guest register reveal frequent famous visitors including Teddy Roosevelt, Andrew E. Douglass (the astrophysicist who first discovered the tree-ring dating theory, also Alice's older brother), anthropologists Adolph Bandelier and Charles Lummis, western artist Maynard Dixon, writer Lanier Bartlet, journalist Olive Ennis, rancher W.P. Metcalf (who managed the Estancia Ranch which was reputedly larger than the state of Rhode Island), and members of noted New Mexico families including the Dows of Torrance County and the Ilfields of Albuquerque.

The Reas entertained their guests and fed them their best, usually kid goat meat. Jerry Whitman recalls, "so well-fed on the wild pasturage of the mountains that the yearling kids . . . were as tasty and tender as the best deer meat." No doubt the magic of the Rea table contributed. Family obituaries of the past capture the charm and character of this historic family. Eva Douglass wrote of her deceased sister Alice in 1946, "No matter how many guests came, room was found for them.... Friends used to urge her to open a restaurant and let them pay, but she would not.

Farm hands were hired, improvements were made, and conveniences came to the ranch. A phone line was installed to the Dow store in Tajique and El Bosque became a fire lookout. The girls, little Alice and Lilley, built a mile long log fence around the aspen grove to keep the cows out of the poisonous larkspur. Jerry Whitman writes, "Ladies in those days had Women's Lib, to work like a man as much as they could."

But the laws of nature are strict and often seem cruel. The winter of 1909 proved to be devastating. Half of the Rea goat herd, 250 of them, froze to death in a single winter storm.

No family saga is complete without a romance; the Reas, too, have one to share. In 1906, Lilley Whitman and Fred Rea eloped on burro to Los Lunas. They returned to their mountaintop for a honeymoon and life together in a new, aspen log cabin built behind the main cabin "across the path."

A son Archie Rea (famous and well-respected resident of Tajiue until his death in 1977) was born to Lilley and Fred in 1908, and a daughter Annie (who died as a young girl) was born in 1909.

With a lifetime's dreams ahead of them, a young family sprouted, and the energy of unfaded youth, Lilley and Fred's time together ended tragically in the winter of 1909 . . . Fred died of typhoid pneumonia at the age of 22 leaving behind a widow of 16 with two babies still in arms. The mountain's cruelty seemed relentless. Fred was buried in a private spot on the mountain where he had lived all but the first two years of his life.

Lilley Whitman Rea, whose only goal in life was "to be just like Alice Douglass Rea," is remembered as the most beautiful and dignified lady in Torrance County. Helen D'Spain proudly recalls her late sister-in-law, "Lilley was dignified. I mean DIGNIFIED," as she straightens her sitting posture to an extreme, as if to demonstrate.

Lilley later married Louis Bachman, the well-loved German forest ranger for the Sandias and Manzanos. In 1914 they became the residents of the old Tajiue Cabin Ranger Station along then roaring Tajiue Creek. After Louie's death in 1944, Lilley married George Formwalt in 1946. She lived in Tajiue with an unhampered view from her back porch of Bosque Peak until her death in 1986 at the age of 95 . . . the last person to die who lived on El Bosque.

But life continued on the Bosque, albeit without the youthful energy of Fred, Lilley and the children. 1909 brought improved health to Archibald and renewed vigor. An additional piece of land was homesteaded to the east. More farming could be done and a cabin was built in order to "prove up on it."

An obsession to uncover alleged buried Inca treasure in a nearby cave in the rimrocks occupied Archibald for seven years. With the help of others, he dug out the famous Cave Spring Cave near the final leg of ascent to the Bosque. Jerry Whitman helped his uncle dig: It was dug out completely back to solid rock and nothing of a gold treasure was found excepting some Indian arrowheads in the dirt fill, indicating Indians had previously occupied the cavern, probably in ancient times, as some geologists from the University of Albuquerque had thought when they examined the cave years later.

The new homestead claim and the excavation of the cave proved to be too much for the aging Archibald. He died in October 1917, after a 27 yearlong love affair with the mountain.

Ruth Riley Rea, the vibrant matriarch of the current Rea descendants, now in her eighties, and widow of Archie Rea tells a particularly graphic account of the death of Archibald Rea: He died in the evening and Alice sat up with him all night, you did in those days. She was alone except for a ten year old boy hired to help with the chores. The next morning, Alice called on the phone down to the Ojer Ranch [now Inlow Youth Camp]. They came right up to help bury Archibald, breaking trail through twenty foot snowdrifts, blasting through three-foot thick ice with dynamite to dig a grave.

Archibald was buried next to his son Fred in the protection of the aspens, on the mountaintop. His obituary eloquently describes him: A man of sterling honesty and refined tastes; a talented musician and a lover of the beautiful in nature, literature and art; and a witty and instructive conversationalist . . . Mr. Rea was not an ordinary man . . . his was a character which impressed itself on a very wide circle, and it is not too much to say that among men having nothing to do with public life there was not a man in New Mexico more widely known or highly valued as a friend or acquaintance.

Alice Rea left the mountain after her husband's death that winter. She descended to begin a new life with her daughter Alice at the foot of the mountain to the west in Commanche Canyon at Rancho Ojo de las Casas. She continued to care for the children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren until her death in 1946 at age 94.

In 1927, a young Torrance County cowboy named Nim Scott first rode up on the Rea cabins on Bosque Peak. "Everything was left in place" he reported. The cabins were still intact, the beds were still made. It was like they had just walked away and would be back."

Archibald and Fred Rea never left the mountain. They lived there, they died there, they were buried there, and now they have become one with the mountain, the earth, the grass, the water at the spring below. The others, who eventually came down for one reason or another, left their spirits there as well. But Archibald and Fred stayed.

The people died, unaware of the legacy they left behind. The ranch died. And, ironically, the spring on top dried up. But despite the demise, new generations of Reas were born below, Bosque mountain lived on, and the earth and grass continued. Since the Reas, life on the Bosque has been limited to passersby, cattle in search of graze, wandering deer, mountain lions and bobcats, bears and coyotes, along with hikers, riders and campers leaving their tracks behind as evidence. Bits of wreckage of an Air Force plane crash from the thirties can still be spotted on the west face.

El Bosque the peak, the forest, the legacy remains, signed in eloquent epigrams, somewhat wiser for its experience, silent, solitary and provocative as ever.