

Talpa Ridge

A pictorial essay with captions

Malcolm Collier, ©2023



This essay looks at the location, character, and cultural significance of the Talpa Ridge. It draws on photographs, oral histories, and personal/family knowledge and experience. Sources are described in more detail after the end of the essay.

The photographs from the 1930s and 1940s are by John Collier Jr. All other photographs are by Malcolm Collier.



Above - View looking southwest down the Talpa Ridge. The southern sides of the ridge drains into the Rio Chiquito, the north and west sides drain into the Taos valley between the Rio Chiquito and Cañon.



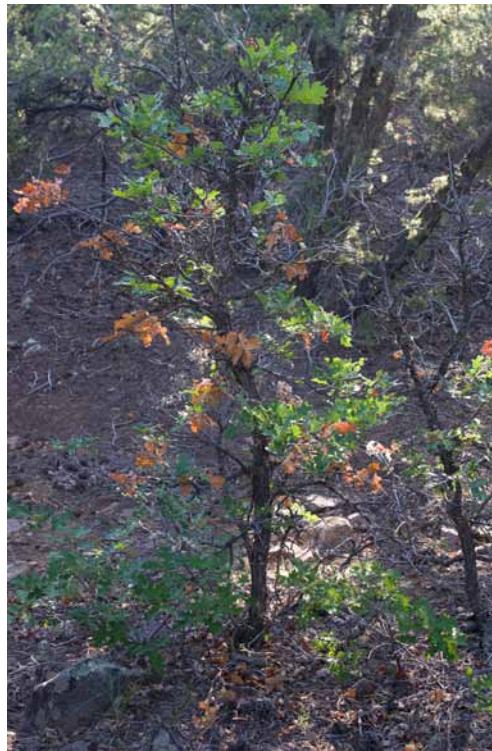
For purposes of this essay, the lower Talpa Ridge starts at the Rio Chiquito (at about 7000 feet elevation) and ends where the trails from Este Es Road reach the ridge (at about 8000 feet elevation.) The upper ridge then extends up from that point to the peak (a bit over 9000 feet elevation) above the overlook where the Ojitos trail makes a sharp turn to continue on up the mountain.

Below - The ridge overlooks the entire Taos Valley.





The ridge is dominated by piñon and juniper.



But some scrub oak, pines, and firs can be found as altitude increases.

Numerous smaller dry land plants are found and in wet years grasses and flowers proliferate.





Piñon, juniper, blue grama and other grasses, chamisa, and many other plants provide food for many birds, small animals, rabbits, coyotes (they do eat piñon nuts and juniper berries), and larger animals like elk and a few deer. In addition to coyotes, other predators include hawks, owls, bears, and mountain lions. Traditionally, people from the adjoining communities hunted here and still do in the larger areas of former Rio Grande del Rancho Grant which the Talpa Ridge belonged.





Above - 2013 panorama from the lower section of Talpa Ridge. The lowest section of the ridge borders on the residential and farming areas along Maestas Road. Historically, this was referred to as the community of Rio Chiquito, today it is more commonly assumed to be part of Talpa.

The human history of Talpa Ridge begins long before the settlements of Rio Chiquito, Talpa, Ranchos, and Llano Quemado. In addition to the nearby pre-European pueblo villages at Pot Creek and in Llano Quemado, there are or have been the remains of multiple habitations sites in the area adjoining the ridge and on its lower slopes - including five near the current Talpa *deposito* and others further north. Many more sites undoubtedly existed before disappearing with the expansion of homes and fields starting in the 18th century.

Below - Looking up the Rio Chiquito from mid way up the Talpa Ridge. All of this area, including the Talpa Ridge, was part of the much larger Rio Grande del Rancho Grant of 1795. This was a community grant to the inhabitants of communities in the southern part of Taos valley. The grant was recognized by the U.S government in the late 1800s but, unfortunately, lost to the communities by about 1906 due, in large part, to the incompatibility between local custom and prior legal/tax practices on one hand and Anglo American law and tax practices on the other, as well as the economic realities of the times. I will leave the details of grant history to others.



Above - Many homes in the older section of Rio Chiquito were located on the lower slopes of the ridge, seen in the background here. The older homes in this immediate neighborhood date to approximately 1830. Alberto Tafoya home behind, Tomasita's house to the right, c1939.

Water



Above - Talpa *deposito* 1984, prior to more recent modifications. The Talpa Ridge drainage area provides water to the Rio Chiquito and in turn to numerous *acequias* in the southern part of Taos valley. This water was essential to the communities, not only for agriculture but also for domestic and other needs. The lower foothills also provided the stones for the facing of the reservoir when it was enlarged in late 1930s as a WPA project.

Below - Rudolfo or Alfonso Sandoval threshing *alverjon* (peas). c1939.



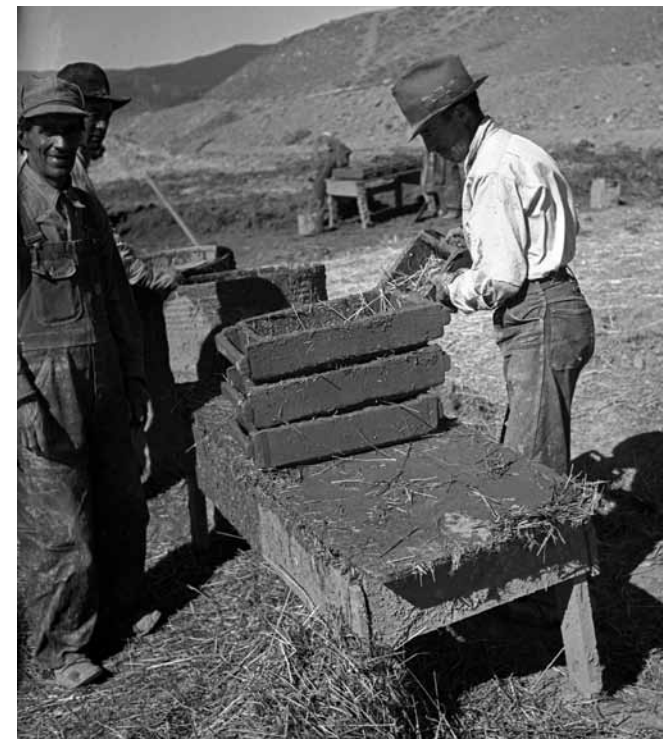
Below - Macedonio Valerio? harvesting wheat in 1939.



Above - Pascual Maestas irrigating in spring, probably 1947 but possibly 1940.

Below - Antonio Lopez?, Alfredo Archuleta, and Leandro Duran threshing wheat, 1939. The machine belonged to Leandro Duran.





Above left - Water was essential for house construction. Here we see Ricardo Archuleta mixing mud to make adobes. Behind him are Patricio, Clarence, Alicia, and Juan Archuleta.
Above center - Juan and Alicia smoothing the mud in the form before Ricardo lifts it off.
Above right - Water was also important for public works, here community members making bricks to build the Ranchos public school, a WPA project. On the left is possibly Juan Dolres Gonzales, in back is Andres Maestas, and on the right is one of the Valerios - Leandro, Eduardo, or Ben. Note the bank of the then newly enlarged Talpa *deposito* in background. All photographs 1939 or 1940.

Left - c1934. In addition to providing water for livestock, *acequias* also provided water and a locale for washing cloths. This photograph was made between Ranchos and Cordillera along the *Acequia Bajo la Loma*, which dates to 1760.

Right - Water from *acequias* was also the primary source of water for homes. When hot water was needed it was heated on wood burning stoves using wood from the lower Talpa Ridge. Photograph c1939.



Wood and grazing

The Talpa Ridge was an important source of firewood, much of which was hauled by mules and burros as the steep hillsides was not friendly to wagons. Wood gathering on the Talpa Ridge ended after WW II but many community members still obtain firewood from parts of the larger former grant area. The larger Rio Grande del Rancho grant also provided communities with wood for vigas, latillas, and other construction needs. This is still true today.

The ability to graze livestock, especially sheep, on the Rio Grande del Rancho Grant was a crucial element in the survival and economy of the communities. Although title to the grant was lost early in the 20th century, community members continued to use many areas of the grant for summer grazing until WW II, especially along the Rio Chiquito and up the Talpa ridge to Garcia Park. Jose de la Luz Romero reported entire summers there in the late 20s and into the 30s. Much of this livestock was trailed up the Talpa Ridge in the spring and down in the fall.



Above - Eustacio Romo and Antonio Romo unloading firewood, 1939.

Left - Sheep in the Rio Grande del Rancho Grant, 1940.

Below - Garcia Park, 2012. Cattle are grazed here today, as evidenced by neatly trimmed lower branches of these aspens in Garcia Park.



A spiritual place

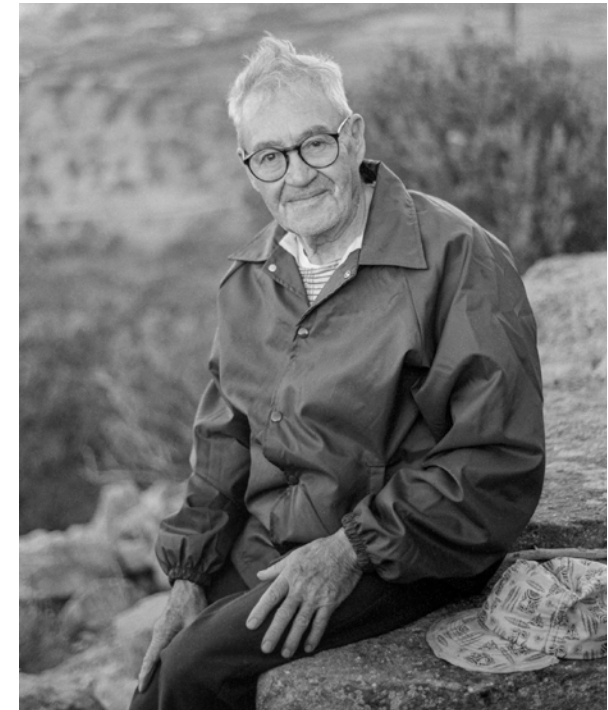
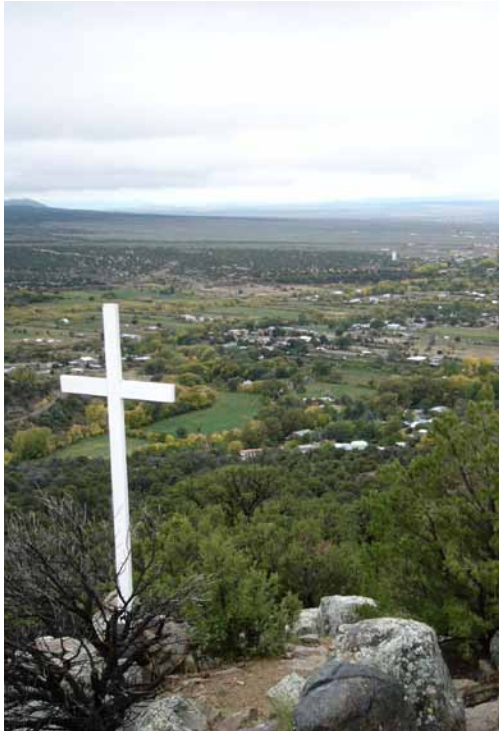


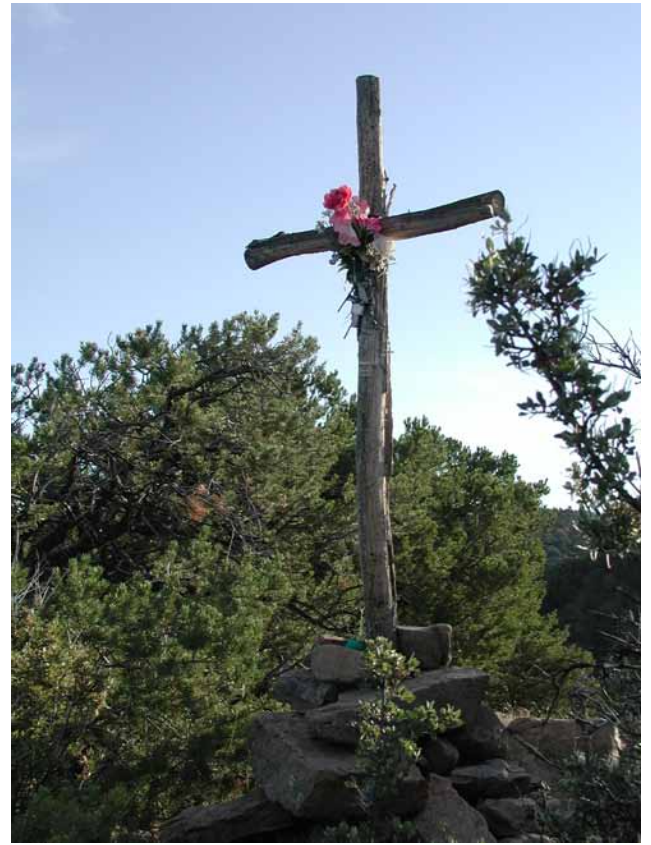
Above - The Talpa morada dates from about 1830 but the spiritual significance of the lower Talpa Ridge predates that time.

The spiritual importance of the lower Talpa Ridge is not to be underestimated or trivialized. While the shrines near the calvario at the top of the hill are widely known, many others are encountered throughout the area. Most are private and not easily found. Some have been carefully maintained for decades, others are more transitory, replaced by new ones over time. The individual shrines are important, but it is the place, the locale, that is most spiritually significant, regardless of the permanence or passing character of each shrine. Many people walk here because of its spiritual nature, even if those who do not have shrines there. The images on this page and the next are only a small sample of the evidence of spiritual activity.

The late Ralph Mondragon requested this portrait after he had walked, slowly, to the shrines at the top of the hill.

Photograph by Malcolm Collier, 1994.





Trails and roads



Above - Entrance to Rio Chiquito c1934. The feeder ditch to the *deposito* can be seen, faintly, in the center/left.

Below - Looking across fields lower down it can be seen that the current road did not exist when this photograph was made, probably in 1947 but possibly in 1940.



Above - Before construction of the current Rio Chiquito road the main entry into the canyon was via a wide trail/road along the north side, remains of which are seen here.

Below - Rio Chiquito at Drake Canyon before the road, 1939 or 1940. My father recalled walking here many times with Eloy Maestas in the 1930s.





Most of the existing trails are old wood gathering trails, wider where they converge and more narrow elsewhere. Most are in fairly good condition today, except where damaged by ATV activity. Like almost all traditional trails world wide, they evolved naturally from the passage of people and animals, following the natural flow of the landscape. A few trails serve to access major sites of shrines, like the small trail seen in the photograph below.



This trail on the lower ridge, close to Talpa, shows signs of light ATV use. Some other trails in the lower foothills have suffered significant damage from ATVs and need remediation, although ATV activity has declined somewhat in recent years.



According to Tito Archuleta, this small road was built by Juan Fernandez and Eli Sandoval with plans to haul logs from the Rio Chiquito to a planned small saw mill north of the Fernandez house. It starts behind the reservoir, climbs across the face of the hill to cross the big arroyo behind the hill, then continues toward the Rio Chiquito before ending abruptly. The date for this activity is not clear but probably after 1940 and before 1948.



The planned road and sawmill suggests that they may not have been fully aware the community no longer had legal access to the Rio Chiquito and that their road construction was blocked by the lumber company, which then built their own road into the Rio Chiquito. There may be documentation regarding this from lumber company records and other sources for those who wish to investigate.

Below - These two views from the lower end of the Talpa Ridge show the communities most closely associated with the ridge - Rio Chiquito/Talpa, Ranchos, Llano Quemado - in 1934 and in late December 2022.

While the connections of these communities to the ridge have evolved over time, they are indeed still linked.





END

Sources on the next page

Sources

Aside from family and personal knowledge, this essay is informed by photographs made by my father, John Collier Jr, between 1934 and 1950, as well as photographs I have made from 1958 to the present.

During the past thirty years I have used photographs in informal oral history interviews with a large number of older members of the local communities. For the information in this essay I am particularly grateful to the following individuals: Eloy Maestas, Carolina Romo, Jose de la Luz (Joe) Romero, Guillerma (Willy) Maestas Romero, Alex Maestas, Junior Maestas, Leo Mondragon, Tito Archuleta, Florida Archuleta, Juan Archuleta, Ralph Mondragon, Urban Romero Sr., Tomas Duran, Maggie and Maggie Duran, Tilio Romero, Frank Maestas, Guillermo (Willy) Maestas, Tony Romo, Ruben Lopez, and Herman Fernandez.

General background information on land grants and regional social, cultural, and economic factors was sourced from the following books:

George I. Sanchez - *Forgotten People*, William deBuys - *Enchantment and Exploitation*, Charles L. Briggs and John R. Vaness - *Land, Water, and Culture*.

The author and the photographers

Malcolm Collier is a Taos native, partially raised in Talpa, as well as in Canada, Peru, and California. He attended Talpa School for elementary grades before completing middle, secondary, and college education in California, finishing with an MA in Anthropology from San Francisco State University. A founder and long time faculty member of the Asian American Studies Department and College of Ethnic Studies at San Francisco State, he is now a Lecturer Emeritus. He is also active in the field of Visual Anthropology, with publications and research/work experience in the Southwest, California, Alaska, and Mexico. He is a current property owner and part time resident in Talpa, with intimate first hand knowledge of the Talpa Ridge, having explored it for over seventy years.

John Collier Jr came to Taos in 1920 at the age of seven and spent his later childhood and teens split between Taos and the San Francisco Bay Area. He established residence in Rio Chiquito/Talpa in 1934, in the same home the family still occupies. Although trained in painting by Maynard Dixon, in the 1930s he moved to photography, establishing a photo studio in Taos in 1939. After being hired in 1941 as a photographer for the Farm Security Administration, he had a long career as a photographer, a pioneering visual anthropologist, and college professor.