EXTENSIONS OF REMARKS

June 15, 2000

Mr. UDALL of New Mexico. Mr. Speaker, today I would like to bring to your attention the beautiful Baca Ranch which lies in my third congressional district of New Mexico. I have worked very closely with the entire New Mexico congressional delegation: Senator PETE V. DOMENICI, Senator JEFF BINGAMAN, HEATHER HOPEN and Representative JOE SKEEN of the 2nd District, to ensure that the Baca Ranch can become part of our citizens' patrimony. It is my hope that very soon this chamber will favorably consider and approve the acquisition of the Baca Ranch that all of us in the delegation have worked so intently for. I believe that we must preserve this natural treasure for the future generations in New Mexico and throughout our country.

New Mexico Magazine is the oldest state magazine in the United States. Every month this periodical publishes articles and items of interest that touch persons who are interested in or feel affection for the Land of Enchantment. The June 2000 issue contains a beautiful layout that includes a description and photographs of the Valley of the Moon ranch by Douglas Preston and photographer Christine Preston. The editors of New Mexico Magazine have granted me the honor of inserting the text of this article into the CONGRESSIONAL RECORD so that everyone can share in the wonder that is the Baca Ranch.

BRINGING THE BACA

By Douglas Preston

N.M. 4, the main road through the Jemez Mountains, winds through steep canyons and ponderosa forests for many miles. As it reaches the heart of the mountains, a spectacular vista breaks out: a high meadow of incredible vastness, called the Vallee Grande, riboned with streams and rimmed by 11,000-foot peaks. Those who stop to admire the view can’t help but notice the barbed wire fence and “No Trespassing” signs that indicate this enticing valley and the mountains beyond lie on private property.

This is the Baca Location No. 1, a 100,000-acre ranch embedded within the Santa Fe National Forest. For more than half a century the federal government has tried to acquire this exquisite piece of land. Last fall the Forest Service and the family that owns the property, the Dunigans, reached a tentative agreement to transfer the property to the American people for $101 million. All that remains is for Congress to provide the funds. If the deal goes through it will be one of the largest and most important land acquisitions in the American West in decades.

The Baca Location No. 1—also known as the Baca Land and Cattle Company—encompasses one of the legendary geological landscapes in America, known as the Valles Caldera. The Valles Grande and the mountains and valleys beyond are the remnants of a gigantic crater, called a caldera, formed by an eruption more than a million years ago. Much of what we know about volcanic crater formation comes from decades of exploration of the Valles Caldera. It is one of the world’s most intensively studied geological landscapes.

An observer standing on the site of Santa Fe 1.2 million years ago, looking westward, would have witnessed the birth of the Valles Caldera in a cataclysm of breathtaking violence. Before the eruption, our observer would have seen a grouping of interlocking volcanic peaks not unlike mountains today, shaped by earlier volcanic activity. (Povodero and Chicoma Peaks in the Jemez today are remnants of these earlier volcanoes.) Contrary to popular belief, there was never a mountain anywhere near as high as Mt. Everest at the site. The highest peaks in this earlier range were probably about 12,000 feet—the same as the Jemez today.

The big blowup started out small—some faint earth tremors, the distant sound of thunder and a cauliflower of ash rising into the atmosphere. Because the prevailing winds were blowing out of the southeast carrying the ash toward Utah, our Santa Fe observer would have had an excellent view. Over the days and weeks, a nascent volcano gradually built up through fresh eruptions, each bigger than the last. And then the climax came. One or more furious explosions hurled a cloud of ash 100,000 feet into the atmosphere, where they formed a gigantic mushroom cloud. The sounds of the explosions were so thunderous that they bounced off the upper atmosphere and traveled around the curve of the Earth, to be heard thousands of miles away. Like a firestorm, the eruption sucked air inward, generating gale-force winds of 75 to 100 miles per hour. The cloud created its own weather system. As it rose in the sky, lightning ripped through it, and it began dropping great columns of rain and snot hail.

As the magma emptied out from below the Earth’s surface, the underground roof of the magma chamber began to collapse. The volcanic slumped in, cracking in concentric circles and triggering earthquakes. A gigantic depression formed. The pumice and ash, instead of being shot upward out of a single pipe, now began spouting out of every crack and crevice in the roof of the magma chamber. The eruption became horizontal instead of vertical. Huge avalanches of ash, glowing orange at more than a thousand degrees, raced down the mountainsides at speeds greater than 150 miles per hour, flattening thousands of trees in their path. (The cylindrical shape of the cloud would be found much later by geologists.)

When these superheated avalanches hit the Rio Grande, they vaporized the river with a fantastic roar. The ash plugged up the river, causing it to back up into a lake. When the water finally burst through, devastating flash floods swept downstream. The spreading cloud of ash ashed so profoundly that at midday you could not see the hand in front of your face. When the dust...
finally settled, our observer in Sante Fe would have seen the line of the Jemez Mountains much as they appear today, minus Redondo Peak. That mountain eerily rose up later, a blister in the earth pushed up by rising hot buttered magma and went on to make a new volcano. The collapse of the magma chamber left a giant crater, or caldera, which soon filled with water to become a crater lake. Over the years, there were flurries of smaller eruptions, and gradually the lake bottom filled with sediments and lava flows to make a gentle floor. The lake eventually dried up, and the area covered the fertile bottomlands, creating the Valles Grande and other vast grass valleys on the ranch, such as the Valles San Antonio and the Valencia Mountains. The Jemez eruption, for all its power, was only fair to mid-size. Geologists estimate the eruption spewed out some 300 cubic kilometers of pumice ash. This was big compared to Mount St. Helens (half a cubic kilometer) and Krakatoa (1 cubic kilometer), but smaller than the Mogolloon eruption (1,000 cubic kilometers) or the San Juan (5,000 cubic kilometers.) Even so, hot springs, caves, and lava flows, the Jemez Caldera will always hold a special place.

Human beings probably first moved into the area, the Jemez Mountains about 12,000 years ago. It was richly settled by Pueblo Indians in the 13th and 14th centuries, and some of the largest pueblo ruins in the country can be found there. But by the time the Spanish arrived the Pueblo Indians had largely abandoned the mountains, except for seasonal hunting, to build their pueblos along the Rio Grande. The Jemez Mountains, dating back 25 million years, and an even larger one in the San Juan Mountains. The Jemez eruption, for all its power, was only fair to mid-size. Geologists estimate the eruption spewed out some 300 cubic kilometers of pumice ash. This was big compared to Mount St. Helens (half a cubic kilometer) and Krakatoa (1 cubic kilometer), but smaller than the Mogolloon eruption (1,000 cubic kilometers) or the San Juan (5,000 cubic kilometers.) Even so, hot springs, caves, and lava flows, the Jemez Caldera will always hold a special place.

The Jemez Mountains, a birthplace of the Jemez Mountains, was these summers that changed the way Dunigan thought about the land: “The longer he owned the property,” and Dunigan said, “the more he came to think of it as a unique natural asset it was—that its value was enhanced through conservation rather than development or resource exploitation.” As a result, Dunigan made many changes that greatly improved the health of the land. He undertook a long and expensive lawsuit to maintain the balance between grasslands and forests.

Dunigan’s efforts created, among other things, a superb habitat for elk. In mid-century, elk found in Yellow stone had been introduced in the Jemez Mountains. The elk population grew rapidly. It stands at 8,000 today, many of which summer on the Baca’s 39,000 acres of grasslands.

According to his family, Dunigan often expressed his hope that the land would end up going to the American people. In late 1978 he began pressing the sale of the ranch, to the federal government, but the negotiations ended when Dunigan unexpectedly died in 1980. The Dunigan family reopened discussions with the government in 1997, but they fell apart in early 1999 over issues of confidentiality.

“...there was a realization on everyone’s part,” says Andrew, “that we had come a long way and that this was such an important thing that it was worth putting aside our differences.” This they did, and the Dunigan family and the government agreed to go forward on a price. Final negotiations are in progress, and Congress has made steps to appropriate the funding. The Baca acquisition enjoys strong support among conservators, environmentalists, and the public. It has the backing of the New Mexico Congressional delegation from both parties, as well as the Clinton administration. Most importantly, it has the strong support of the people of northern New Mexico. This time around, it seems likely that the deal will go through.

The Baca is a magical place, one of the most extensive high-mountain grasslands in the United States. It is a land of deep fir forests and high tujunga watersheds; of sweeping meadows dotted with elk and mule deer; of aspen groves that turn the hillsides gold in the fall; of high mountains echoing with the whistling cry of bald eagles; of clear streams alive with yellow trout. Mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, and black bears rove its mountain slopes. It hosts a number of rare species, including one found only in the area, the Jemez Mountains salamander. It is the habitat of over 300 bird species, including the rare canyon wren, and 400 species of plants, many of them endemic to the Jemez Mountains. It is home to 2,000 acres of pinyon and juniper shrubs, the historic 18th and Vine district in Kansas City, Missouri. The American Jazz Museum, previously known as the Kansas City Jazz Museum, is the first museum in the world devoted exclusively to jazz. The gallery showcases the often difficult plight and rare successes of one of America’s first original art forms.

The museum, which opened in 1997, is housed in a modern 50,000 square foot complex at the historic 18th and Vine district in Kansas City. Once inside, visitors find interactive exhibits and sample songs which tell the story of jazz and its musicians in words, pictures, and sounds. Last year, the complex was visited by more than 350,000 visitors who came from all parts of the city, county, and world to relive the golden age of Kansas City jazz in the 1920’s and 1930’s. In this era, legendary Kansas City musicians such as Charlie “Bird” Parker, Count Basie, and Jay McShann developed swing and spread the popularity of jazz across the land.

Not only does the museum educate those who come in from the street to learn about jazz, but it also offers 4 symposia each year on jazz and its influences.