

IT  
HAPPENED  
IN TAOS

by

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## *Preface*

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This book is written for the purpose of explaining in some detail the organization and the work of the Taos County Project, an experiment in coöperative county planning and action in Taos County, New Mexico, from 1940 to 1943. It is an extension of remarks published previously in bulletin form by the University of New Mexico Press under the titles of "The First Annual Report of the Taos County Project" and "The Second Annual Report of the Taos County Project."

These two reports were made during the life of the Project and are mainly narrative in nature. This volume goes into fuller detail with respect to the organization and techniques of the Project, and ventures to evaluate its work. The book is written, not as a critique of professional social work techniques, but for the purpose of stimulating thinking on the main problems dealt with.

The book does not mention the names of those hundreds of persons who are due the credit for the success of the Project: agency officials and workers, local, state, and national; public officials, county and state; professional advisers from many sections of the country; public-spirited

citizens of Taos County; and a great army of farmers and rural laymen. It was through everybody's coöperation that the job was done.

To the American Association for Adult Education for its advice and guidance in the critical early stages of the venture and to the Carnegie Corporation of New York for its liberal grant of money to finance the Project, is due a major portion of credit. For the most excellent set of photographs, we acknowledge the services of the Bureau of Agricultural Economics of the Department of Agriculture. All photographs are used through the courtesy of the Bureau and are the work of Irving Rusinow.

*Albuquerque, New Mexico*  
*December, 1945*

J. T. REID

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*Everybody's Business is  
Everybody's Business*

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*A* VERY UNUSUAL thing has happened in Taos County, New Mexico. It is so much of a departure from the ordinary that it is hard to believe. Yet it is true. *Everybody got together on everybody's business!* No longer is everybody's business *nobody's* business. The obvious result is that some very important progress has been made—important not only for Taos County itself, but for the rest of the country as well.

Everybody's business, in this instance, is the total welfare of all those living in the county—the deep-seated problems that have nagged and puzzled and hampered the citizens for decades, even for generations. And these problems were many in number, more than are customarily found in other counties of the land. What is more, they were seemingly more annoying and insoluble, because they were chronic, yielding less to ordinary methods of attack.

But eight or ten of these knotty problems, among the many, have been scientifically analyzed, with appropriate solutions devised and put into practice. Some very amazing things have happened; things which few thought could hap-



pen; things which have raised the hopes and aspirations of the people and pointed the way to a new day.

These problems were not minor, isolated difficulties. They were fundamental obstacles to good living. For instance, there was the need for more water for irrigation, without which there was a dark future; there was the fact that the people's farms were eroding away for lack of proper preventive measures; grazing land had diminished until there was nearly none for the man with small herds of sheep, horses, and cattle; the very livestock itself had degenerated until the little runty animals were hardly worth taking care of; educational facilities—such as newspapers, magazines, radios, moving pictures, and informed discussion—were almost totally absent; and about two thirds of the people of the county were unable to secure adequate medical service, even during critical illness.

All of these problems, and others, have been attacked and processes put into operation which have already brought objective improvement and which promise more for the future.

And in it all, the most important thing is that *the people have done most of the job themselves*, coöperatively and in harmonious effort with the many organized agencies available for their assistance. All of the agencies involved in the program had been operating in the county for years, each going about its prescribed duties more or less independently. Though some progress was being made, the problems persisted. The people, individually and by groups and communities, did what they could, but the problems were too big for them, too complex and deep-rooted for sporadic or isolated attack.

Then came organization, getting together, everybody in the county working in unison on every problem, all of the

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problems. Such tactics have a way of making things move. They did in this case. Problems began to crack, to break up and to show their vicious natures. Solutions and remedies were devised by agency specialists coöperatively among themselves and with the people; responsibility for putting the solutions into practice was allocated to the proper agencies, individuals, and communities; and the wheels of progress began to roll faster and more effectively.

But it was the people themselves who had to try out the solutions, had to do the work, had to sacrifice and to coöperate with each other, had to furnish the heart and soul of the movement. At this point came the crucial test. Would a people who had been dirt-poor for generations, who had lacked functional education, who had developed a philosophy of defeatism, who had indeed developed into charges on public charity—would these people accept the grueling task of carrying the heavy end of their own rehabilitation?

The most heartening thing of all is that they *did*.

This was done with the full realization by them of the nature of that responsibility; it was not a snap judgment, an enthusiastic and unconsidered gesture, but a mature determination based on careful consideration and open and free discussion in community meetings—meetings at which only local residents were present. That determination to do all they could to solve their own problems has persisted all through the program for county improvement. This spontaneous response of the people is one of the significant discoveries of the Project.

How could such a thing happen? What are the details of accomplishment? That is the story that will fill the following pages.

**E**VERY FOOT OF Taos County is more than a mile above sea level, some of it over two miles. The great Sangre de Cristo Range, a spur of the majestic Rockies, forms the eastern boundary of the county, down whose slopes pour the life-giving waters of the settlements sequestered in the little valleys. From the foot of the mountains stretches a wide tableland, dry and almost devoid of vegetation except the desert sage, weeds, and stunted cedar and piñon. The county is some sixty miles long by thirty-five miles wide. Through its middle from north to south runs the fabled Rio Grande in its truly gorgeous canyon hundreds of feet below the clifty lip of the crowding mesa.

The climate is indeed exhilarating. The average annual rainfall is only about twelve inches, most of which comes in August rains and in midwinter snows. The average temperature range in the inhabited part of the county is from about eighty-five degrees on the hottest days in summer to about ten or fifteen degrees below zero in winter. As would be expected, the winter season is long and the summers accordingly short—about seven months and five months,

respectively. The growing season for crops is seldom longer than 115 days, less in some areas.

Farming and stock-raising are the main occupations. Nearly all farming is by irrigation. Stock-raising is confined chiefly to sheep, though there are some cattle, horses, and hogs. There is practically no poultry-raising. The main farm crops are wheat and alfalfa, much of which is for home consumption. Some home gardening is done.

There are some fifteen main streamlets that run down from the mountains, furnishing water for crops, beast, and man. In each little valley is situated a village, its size and general mode of living determined largely by the amount of the precious water. The extent of land under cultivation in each of the communities varies from about one hundred acres to a thousand acres.

The villages are true communities, isolated from their neighbors by the dividing uplands and ridges. The people live mostly in compact settlements and go out to work the farms up and down the valleys.

Taos County is known far and wide as an art center and tourist resort. About fifty years ago two young artists, traveling by wagon from Denver, came to the little frontier village of Taos, were overwhelmed by the natural beauty of the spot, and settled down to paint what they saw. Thus they founded an art colony that ranks with the best in the world. Their canvases not only record the enchanting landscapes, but give to the world its most forceful presentation of the character and culture of the American Indians of the Southwest. Models are at hand in the historic and picturesque Indian village near Taos.

From May to October each year, in normal times, literally thousands of tourists sojourn in Taos County to enjoy the art masterpieces, to relax in the cool climate, to recharge

their souls with the scenic beauty, and to flip a fly at the sporty trout that churn the icy waters of the streams and the alpine lakes.

To these current attractions of the county may be added its intriguing historical background; the area abounds in relics and lore of the early trappers and traders, the raiding Comanches and Apaches, Father Martinez the pioneer priest, the Indians' wars of rebellion. In the center of the plaza of Taos stands a flagpole from which Old Glory flies *night* and day—a concession granted by a special act of Congress in the days of siege by the daring Plains tribes.

It is not hard, therefore, to understand how Nature and Tradition have become the parents of culture in Taos County, a culture mixed with many strains and elements. It is no wonder that it possesses a unique attraction for people of all kinds—tourists seeking the bizarre, eccentrics seeking atmosphere, anthropologists seeking examples of strange acculturation, reformers seeking ground in which to plant seeds, and tired business people seeking rest without monotony.

The native settlers, those whose families have lived among the towering peaks for generations, whose numbers make up more than ninety per cent of the population of the county, have had the best chance to develop an ingrained love and appreciation of the subtle enchantment of their natural surroundings. Their roots are deep in the soil, their eyes adjusted to seeing things, real and imaginary, from afar, their very bodies adapted to earth and sky, to thin air and lean living. By necessity they live a leisurely life. By ages of partnership with Nature, they are philosophical, patient to the point of fault, kindly, tolerant, and deeply religious. They possess strong qualities of basic stuff—intelligence, honor, determination, ambition—which, though latent some-

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times through circumstances, spring forth quickly when given an opportunity.

These people, the native settlers, are the ones who have tackled their problems barehanded, who have availed themselves of the assistance provided by a paternalistic government, but who ask no more than to be helped with those phases of their problems which they cannot handle alone.

And a remarkable people they are in many respects—remarkable not only for their tenacious racial qualities and customs, but for their unique history as well. For more than two centuries they were a “lost people,” isolated in the hinterland of New Spain, forgotten by warring Mother Spain in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, neglected by Mexico with its newly won independence after 1821, and finally all but ignored by Uncle Sam for three quarters of a century after he had gobbled them up in 1848.

When the English settlers on the eastern coast of this continent were founding Jamestown and beating their way into the wilderness of the Ohio Valley and stampeding into the open spaces of the “wild West,” these Spanish settlers of the Rio Grande Basin were conquering hostile Indians, working mines, establishing huge ranches of sheep and cattle, raising crops on the right valley lands, setting up schools and churches, and otherwise adapting their European culture to the emergencies of a frontier land that had only so much to offer.

Under the medieval system by which they lived, with *ricos* and *hacendados* ruling, more or less independently, over vast grants of land and hundreds of slaves and servants, these Spanish pioneers developed an economy that fitted the soil and took care of their needs. They were a proud and self-reliant people.

Then in the latter part of the nineteenth century came

the squatters and the cattlemen and the outlaws from the States, and competition and exploitation. Progress plodded its inevitable, stubborn way. A militant, forceful, reckless race of men met a proud, lost remnant of landed barons, grown soft with easy living. In less than fifty years, much of the land and other property had changed hands. The Spanish settlers were ill-equipped to meet the issue, for many reasons—the type of decadent life they had fallen into, lack of a driving response to the challenge of an expanding frontier, limited resources and credit for new enterprises, lack of functional education, and others.

The result has been a gradual increase of poverty, with its attendant ills.

There are in the Southwest some two million of these Spanish-speaking citizens of the United States, who are proud of their allegiance to the Stars and Stripes, who fought valiantly for this country in its two recent wars, and who have contributed much of intrinsic value to the culture and growth of this their native land.

But they are a linguistic minority. Most of them speak Spanish as a native tongue, hold ardently to traditional customs inherited from the past, and find it difficult to make the cultural transition to the American way of life. The education provided in the public schools, though consistent with general practice elsewhere in the country, has been inadequate and ill-suited to their needs, resulting in a lowered educational status and the disadvantages that such a condition brings.

They live among their peaks with their handicaps—poverty, sickness, superstition, and ignorance—a challenge to every red-blooded fellow-citizen of this great democracy of ours.

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*Under These Conditions*

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**B**Y *SCIENTIFIC* investigation it has been shown that living conditions in Taos County are far below the average for the country as a whole. Economically the people's plight is very grave.

In the first place, there are too many people living in the county for the natural resources to support adequately under the present system of economy. Not that the county is small. It has an area of 2,256 square miles, a population of 18,528, which gives 8.2 persons per square mile. But most of the land is uninhabitable because it is unwaterable desert or steep and lofty mountains.

Furthermore, more than half of the land of the county is under public ownership, federal or state, from which no tax revenue is forthcoming. Certain large tracts of private land are owned or controlled by large livestock operators, with little or no suitable grazing land left for small stockmen. Certain understandable policies have made it difficult for farmers with small herds of sheep or cattle to secure grazing rights on the National Forest ranges. Because of these conditions, many small operators have gone out of business or reduced their herds to submarginal size.



Over ninety per cent of the people of the county look to the land for a living, wholly or in part. The amount of land in cultivation per capita of farm residents is about one acre. This means that a family of six (the average size of farm families in the county) must try to make a living from six acres, plus the income from a few sheep and cattle, if they have any at all. Since they produce practically no cash crops on the farm, their living is correspondingly limited. Most of the families have to rely on such income as they can get from seasonal labor away from home—on the highways, in the sheep camps, the beet fields, or the lumber camps—to supplement the farm income, indeed to give them any cash at all. It is unbelievable that the average cash income per family per year is less than \$200. Some families of ten have testified that their annual cash income did not exceed \$50!

It is perfectly logical and proper to ask, Why don't some of these people leave the county and go elsewhere for more lucrative incomes, thus leaving things better for those who stay? Such a questioner does not understand with what fervent love these settlers are bound to the land and the area of their birth. They are truly indigenous. Nor will resettlement work with them. This problem of overcrowding seems to have only one solution: that of educating the young people, most of them, at least, to the necessity and the possibility of leaving the county for better opportunities. Even with full success, such a program would take years to accomplish much.

Other questions arise.

Why not develop more farming land? The limit has just about been reached in this direction, because of the limited supply of water for irrigation. Then why not develop more irrigation water through storage? This holds some possibilities, but there are previous legal commitments on water