

Kit Carson Memorial State Park and Cemetery

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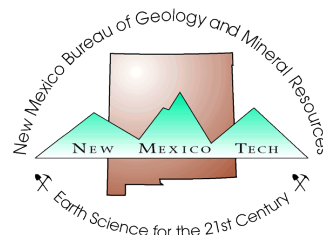
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Kit Carson Memorial State Park and Cemetery, located in the center of Taos, is unlike most cemetery areas. It is not a somber place, but a vibrant tribute to the colorful life of frontiersman and scout Kit Carson. With picnic areas, playgrounds, a baseball field, basketball and tennis courts, bicycling/walking trails winding through a stand of cottonwoods, and even an ice-skating pond in winter it is an urban park (Fig. 1) filled with cheerful sounds. Markers identify various plants and explain local historical features of the park. Restrooms are available, but overnight camping is not allowed.

History

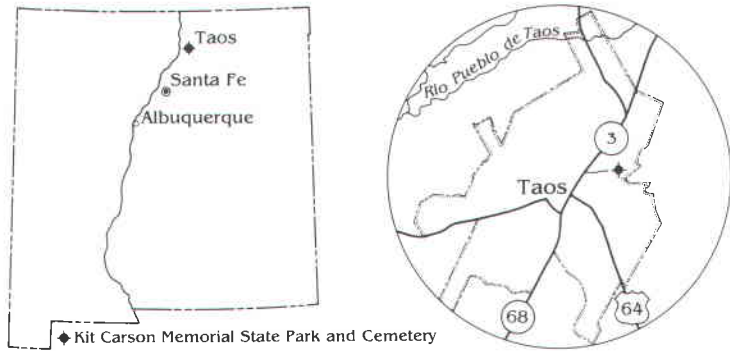
The park is the final resting place of Christopher "Kit" Carson and his family (Fig. 2). Kit Carson was born in Kentucky in 1809. When he was 17, he joined a wagon train headed for Santa Fe. As a young man, he became an accomplished hunter, trapper, guide, and courier. He had a remarkable sense of direction and traveled across the continent several times prior to the arrival of stage coaches, railroads, and most wagon trains. In 1842, 1843, and 1848, he scouted for Captain John C. Fremont. Kit Carson married a Taos girl, Maria Josefa Jaramillo, in early 1843, but family life was not enough to keep him from traveling. In 1846 he guided General Kearney's army during the Mexican War. Afterwards, he settled on a farm at Rayado, south of Cimarron, near Lucien B. Maxwell's home. Both homes are preserved by the Boy Scouts of America on the Philmont Ranch.

Farming did not appeal to him, and in 1854 he accepted an appointment as Indian Agent for the Ute, Apache, and Pueblo Indians. During the Civil War he fought Confederate forces at the Battle of Valverde in central New Mexico and led several successful campaigns against hostile Indians. In 1863, he was ordered to relocate the Navajo and Mescalero Apache Indians to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner. The project, designed to turn the Indians into farmers, failed. The tribes were returned to their original homes within a few years, but not before they had suffered starvation and many deaths. After the war Carson served as the commanding officer at Ft. Craig and Ft. Union, New Mexico, and Ft. Garland, Colorado. He was mustered out of the army on November 22, 1867 (Utley, 1962).

Throughout his travels and adventures, Kit

Carson thought of Taos as his home and spent much of his time there. His Taos home, not far from the state park, is now a museum. In May 1868, 59-year-old Kit Carson died of natural causes at Fort Lyon, Colorado, only months after his wife died during childbirth. Their bodies were moved to Taos and buried at the present site according to their prior request (Vestal, 1928; Estergreen, 1962; Young, 1984).

Doña Teodora Martinez Romero donated the land for the cemetery in 1847 for the burial of American soldiers and civilians killed during the Taos Indian Rebellion. Subsequently, several prominent citizens of Taos and local soldiers who served in the Mexican War, the Indian campaigns of the 1850's, the Civil War, the Spanish American War, and World Wars I and II were buried at the cemetery.



[NOTE: New Mexico state-highway numbers were revised recently. North of Taos NM-3 is designated NM-522. See also Fig. 3.]



FIGURE 1—The cemetery surrounded by Kit Carson Memorial State Park recreation areas. Taos Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains is on the skyline.

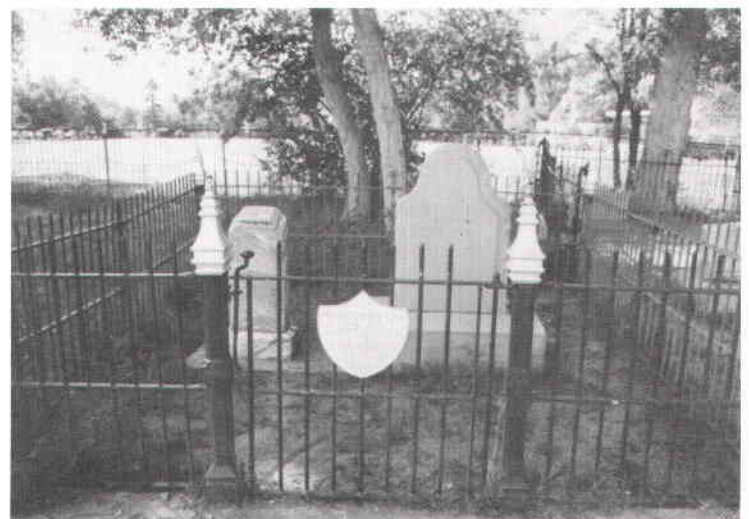


FIGURE 2—The graves of Kit Carson and his wife.

The park, which consists of only 19 acres, was established in 1949 on what was then the edge of town. It is a popular park with annual visitation totaling 150,000–260,000 (New Mexico Natural Resources Department, State Park and Recreation Division, written comm., 1987). Today the park lies in the center of Taos, a cultural and tourist center with museums and historical monuments reflecting Indian, Spanish, and American cultures. The enchanting Taos Pueblo, which has remained relatively unchanged for 450 years, is located northeast of Taos. Many artists and writers call the Taos area their home.

Geology

Kit Carson Memorial State Park and Cemetery is surrounded by spectacular regional geologic features, some of which can be seen from the park. Taos lies in a topographic reentrant along the edge of two contrasting landscapes (Fig. 3). To the west is the broad, gently west-sloping Taos Plateau (elevation about 7,000–7,200 ft). To the east, the escarpment of the Taos Range of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains rises to over 12,000 ft; Wheeler Peak is the highest point in New Mexico with an elevation of 13,160 ft.

The Taos Plateau is actually a half graben (Fig. 4), part of the larger Rio Grande graben, with displacement on the eastern margin (Taos Range). A graben is an elongate, depressed basin that is bounded on both sides by faults adjacent to the mountains. In the Taos area, mountains occur only on the east side. The west-bounding fault is west of the Rio Grande and is covered by basalt flows. As viewed from the park, the Taos Range forms the eastern skyline (Fig. 1). The rugged high peaks in the northern part of the range consist of Precambrian igneous and metamorphic rocks that are 1400 to 1700 million years old. Boulders of these rocks mark the edge of trails through the park. Lithologies include granite, quartzite, schist, felsite, and amphibolite. The smooth, gently sloping hills in the

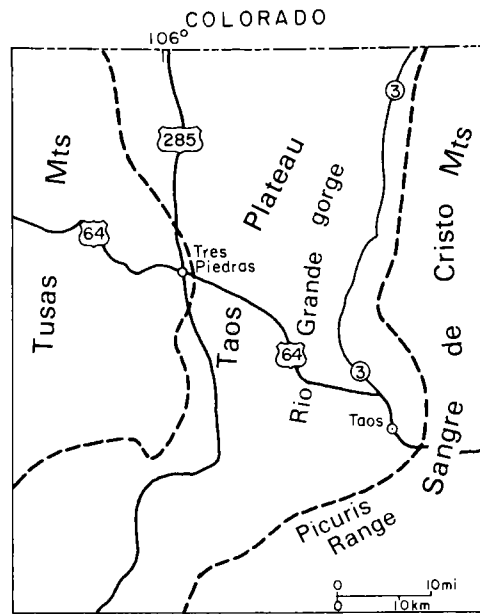


FIGURE 3—Physiography of the Taos area (modified from Personius and Machette, 1984, fig. 1).

southern Taos Range consist of tilted Pennsylvanian sedimentary rocks (Muehlberger and Muehlberger, 1982), some of which were deposited in and adjacent to a vast inland sea about 300 million years ago. The Picuris Range lies south of the Taos Range (Fig. 3) and consists of Precambrian granite and metamorphic rocks.

The western margin is the western edge of the Taos Plateau, west of the Rio Grande gorge. The plateau is underlain by three miles or more of basin-fill sedimentary and igneous rocks (Lipman and Mehnert, 1979; Personius and Machette, 1984). Volcanism occurred in the Taos area 2 to 5 million years ago with the eruption of alkalic to tholeiitic basaltic to andesitic lavas from vents along the western margin of the Taos Plateau (Dungan et al., 1984). Basaltic to andesitic flows covered much of the plateau, from west of

Rio Grande gorge eastward to the Taos city limits. Total thickness of the basalts is unknown but must exceed 650 ft in parts of the gorge (Muehlberger and Muehlberger, 1982). The basalts are nearly identical in composition to basalts found on the ocean floor. Within the park, black basaltic boulders lie along the edges of trails.

The topographic low in which Taos lies is a result of geologic processes. Volcanic and igneous rocks are absent in the Taos reentrant. Thus, this section tends to subside and tilt more than other areas of the plateau that are underlain by the volcanic rocks. The Taos reentrant continues to subside today along the fault at the base of the Taos Range (Muehlberger and Muehlberger, 1982). A fertile floodplain developed in the Taos area between the Rio Pueblo de Taos and the Rio Fernando de Taos. These rivers flow from the Sangre de Cristo Mountains and cross the reentrant before joining the Rio Grande. They provided a reliable supply of irrigation water for the Pueblo Indians and the later Spanish settlers in the Taos area.

Summary

Kit Carson Memorial State Park and Cemetery offers a refreshing contrast to the nearby tourist attractions around and near the Taos plaza. While resting in the midst of some of the most spectacular scenery and geology in northern New Mexico, the park visitor can relax, picnic, stroll through the park, and reflect upon the wild west days of Kit Carson.

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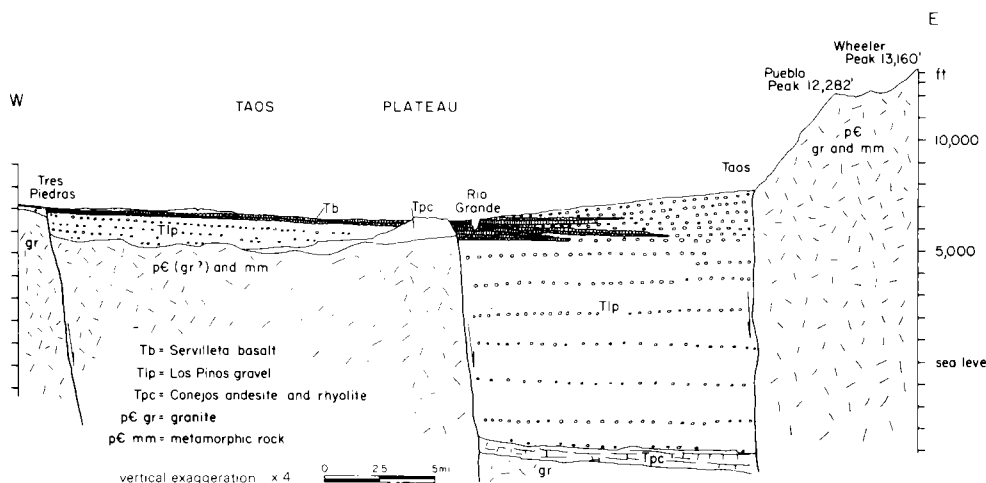


FIGURE 4—Cross section of the Rio Grande graben in the Taos-Tres Piedras area (after Muehlberger and Muehlberger, 1982, p. 67).

—by Virginia T. McLemore