

Taos Pueblo Indians of New Mexico Regain Their Beloved Blue Lake

In New Mexico, the area in the Sangre de Cristo mountains known as Blue Lake has been called "the Indian capitol of the world," by Governor Querino Romero of the Taos Pueblo.

Early this month, the Senate passed an historic bill which restored the Blue Lake area to the people of Taos Pueblo, 64 years after it was taken from them and made part of the

Carson National Forest.

Indian people all over the United States, and the world, have supported the Taos Pueblo in their fight to regain these lands, which are intrinsically sacred to their culture and religion.

The short announcement of the passage, which was hailed by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Louis R. Bruce as "one

of the greatest things the Congress has ever done for Indian people in America," is the climax of a long struggle.

One of the more interesting practices, in a debate of this type, is to browse through pertinent portions of the Congressional Record, seeking the information which Senators have included to bolster their pro and

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con arguments.

Senator Edward Kennedy's office was kind enough to send this paper a copy of the final debates, which include a great deal of the history of the Blue Lake controversy.

Blue Lake, the 48,000 acre area that is at the center of the controversy, is the central focus of the religion of the Taos Pueblo, the religion that impelled its people to refuse a cash settlement for their lands.

"The Taos claim is unique because if Blue Lake and the surrounding lands are not returned to the tribe, it will effectively destroy Taos culture," writes an anthropologist from American University who has made a lifelong study of the Taos Indian culture.

"No other Indian tribe can make that claim, because no other Indian group today relies to the same degree on shrines in a restricted area for the continuance of its religion."

John Boaine, the author of this letter to Senator Lee Metcalf of Montana lived with the Taos Indians for many years and studied their culture after he became an anthropologist.

In his letter to Senator Metcalf, Professor Bodine explains the Taos Indian religion as a sum of many parts. Each integral performer is the guardian of ritual knowledge which he must pass on to a successor. Shrines in the Blue Lake area are, he says, necessary to the performance of rituals and the training of successors in each of the necessary ceremonial roles.

Many Senators in the debate argued that members of the Taos Pueblo would not explain their religion when questioned during Senate subcommittee hearings. Part of this, explains Professor Bodine, is the result of past discriminations and persecutions which caused the religion to go underground. Also, he said, it was a result of the fragmented character of the religious practices.

This particular culture value, and the historic claim of the Taos Indians on these lands, are the basis on which they fought their battle to regain them.

Among their supporters, is President Richard M. Nixon, who advocated return of the Blue Lake area to the Taos Pueblo

in his message to the Congress on Indian affairs on July 8, 1970.

Among the vociferous supporters of the Indian claim to trust title was Senator Fred Harris of Oklahoma, one of the sponsors of the Harris-Griffin amendment.

This amendment overrode the so called Anderson amendment bill which was reported out of the Senate Interior and Insular Affairs committee. The Anderson bill provided for the use of the land by the Taos Indians, but not for the granting of trust title.

Harris, along with many other Senators, including Senator Barry Goldwater of Arizona, considered the Harris-Griffin amendment necessary to requite at least one of the injustices done to the Indian people.

"If the Senate wishes to dwell on precedents," Senator Harris told that body, "then it should be reminded of the precedence for destroying the culture, heritage, religion and pride of the American Indian—precedence for this is plentiful."

Under the treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, which ended the Mexican-American War, the American Government assumed sovereignty over all of New Mexico, including the land claimed by the Taos Pueblo.

The Blue Lake area became part of the public domain, not part of the reservation granted to the Taos Pueblo though it had been used by them for ceremonial and other purposes since at least the 13th century.

In 1906, the area was incorporated into the Carson National Forest.

The special interests of the Taos Pueblo in Blue Lake were recognized in a special use permit issued to them in 1940 which controlled access by outsiders.

Increasing use of the area for recreation or other Forest Service "multiple use" programs made them continue to seek title to the land.

Most of the arguments against granting such title, as advanced by Senator Lee Metcalf of Montana, Senator Henry M. Jackson of Washington and others rested upon the precedent which might be set by giving American Indians back their land.

The United States had historically awarded tribes money as compensation for land. With most of America's land claimed by one Indian group or another, this could create dangerous precedents, the Senators said.

Opposition Senators also cited fears that the area would be developed, rather than remain a watershed and wilderness area. They cited support from various conservation groups.

"It will open the door to similar requests for transfer in trust for national parks, wilderness areas, national monuments and all these things that we thought were secure for the benefit, in the public interest, of all the people," said Senator Metcalf.

The final bill which passed the Senate was substantially the Harris-Griffin version, which followed the form of a bill previously passed in the House of Representatives.

Under the terms of the Senate bill, the Blue Lake area would be maintained as a wilderness, with its use restricted to the ceremonial purposes of the Taos Pueblo people who hold trust title to it.