*La labor está muy buena,*
*Maíz, trigo y alberjón,*
*Los rancheros muy contentos,*
*Esperando lo mejor.*

*The fields are doing well,*
*Corn, wheat, and peas,*
*Farmers are very happy*
*Hoping for the best.*

*Source: El Eco del Norte*
*Mora Newspaper*
*November 15, 1909*

## CASE STUDY:

## *ACEQUIAS DE LA SIERRA* AND EARLY AGRICULTURE OF THE MORA VALLEY

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1985

Situated on the eastern watershed of the Rocky Mountains, the Mora area is one of the most beautiful and awe-inspiring mountain valleys in northern New Mexico. During the early Spanish Colonial Period, the lush, fertile meadows in the area and the crystalline waters which flowed along the Mora River provided a popular bivouac area for marauding Indian tribes of New Mexico. Both mountain and plains Indians enjoyed the peaceful comfort of the valley as they traversed through the region in search of wild game, or as they planned their raids among the Spanish settlements in the mountains. Throughout the 1700s, the Mora Valley was also well known to Hispanic New Mexicans from the Santa Cruz and Taos districts. It provided a natural gateway into the eastern plains for *ciboleros* who hunted buffalo and *comancheros* who conducted trading excursions among nomadic tribes.

Despite its breathtaking beauty and the fertile lands which offered excellent prospects for farming, the Mora Valley remained unsettled until the second decade of the Nineteenth Century. For over two centuries, the

settled area of New Mexico had been confined to the irrigable lands which clung to the Río Grande from Taos in the north, continuing downriver to the Belén-Tomé region. Fierce conflicts among allied Spanish and Pueblo Indian settlements with Jicarilla Apache, Navajo, Comanche, and other tribes had prevented population extensions into other parts of New Mexico, especially the eastern flank of the Sangre de Cristos north of Santa Fe. Notwithstanding these unfavorable circumstances, the crammed and growing population of New Mexico eventually spilled further south to Socorro, eastward into the Manzano mountains, and southeast from Santa Fe to San Miguel del Bado in 1794. Westward from the Río Grande, equally adventuresome and daring colonists were moving into the Cebolleta and Cubero Region.[1]

Closer to the Santa Cruz and Taos population centers, smaller settlements such as Embudo, Chamisal, Las Trampas, Truchas and Santa Bárbara had been established away from the Río Grande to the east.[2] These settlements remained on the western flank of the mountains where the people could feel some sense of security by remaining close to the populous Santa Cruz Valley. Since Spanish settlers and Pueblo Indians depended on each other for common defense against the marauding tribes, Pueblos many times allowed Spanish and *mestizo* families to settle on their lands.

Much of the Hispanic population of the Santa Bárbara district was contained within the San Lorenzo de Picurís Pueblo Land Grant, contrary to Spanish decrees which prohibited them from settling on Indian land. The Picurís had allowed this type of occupation, however, and in some cases Spanish settlers had purchased plots of land from them——another violation of Spanish law. Intermarriage among Españoles and the Picurís also occurred, creating a stronger affinity and collective bond for survival between both cultures.[3]

One of the Spanish residents who lived on Picurís Pueblo lands was Antonio Olguín, a soldier who played a major role in the early settlement of the Mora Valley. The Hispanic population near Picurís continued to expand after 1800; and finally, in 1816, Olguín and a group of families needing agricultural lands and water set aside their perilous fear of Indian attacks and engaged in a new settlement venture. They traversed the Jicarilla Mountain and descended into the fertile Mora Valley on the eastern border of the Rockies. This effort consequently launched the settlement of the northeastern sector of the Spanish frontier in New Mexico.[4]

Within a short period of time, this bold attempt to populate the Mora

Valley appeared to be successful and highly stable. In 1818, seventy-six heads of families petitioned the Catholic Church for their own parish and resident pastor at their new settlement known as "San Antonio de lo de Mora." Their request was not granted immediately, for two years later in October 1820, Fray Juan Bruno Gonzales from Picurís toured the *"puesto,"* or settlement, administering confession among the three hundred *"castellano"* residents.[5] This first settlement of the Mora Valley was established at the western end of the valley, or that area which is presently known as Cleveland.

Despite the large body of people reported there in 1820, residents were unable to repel the incessant attacks by nomadic Indians; and sometime prior to 1832, they abandoned the settlement and fields. In early September of 1832, Albert Pike traveled from Taos and Picurís through the Mora Valley with a party of American trappers. They camped near the "Old Village," finding nothing but abandoned "mud houses and rattlesnakes" to shoot at. Pike noted that the need for agricultural land had brought the early settlers across the mountains, even though they risked the hazards of Indian attacks:

> These New Mexicans, with a pertinacity worthy of the Yankee nation, have pushed out into every little valley which would raise half a bushel of red pepper—some of them like this—on the eastern side of the mountains, thus exposing themselves to the Pawnees and Comanches, who, of course, use them roughly. The former tribe broke up the settlement in this valley about fifteen years ago, and the experiment has never been repeated, though this valley, and that of the Gallinas [Las Vegas], are great temptations to the Spaniards.[6]

Sometime after they first settled the Mora Valley, the settlers encountered a shortage of water for their irrigated fields, livestock, and homes. The Mora River at the upper end of the valley did not carry sufficient water to meet the needs of the growing population of San Antonio. The inevitable Indian problem was also beginning to foment as the ominous presence of hostile tribes kept the people clustered together near San Antonio. On October 6, 1818, Antonio Olguín reported from Mora that he had fruitlessly crossed the mountains in pursuit of a band of Navajos and

Jicarilla Apaches who had stolen a herd of horses.[7]

Olguín, the early leader of the San Antonio settlement, also rallied the people to confront the emerging problem of an inadequate supply of irrigation water from the Mora River. He approached the Picurís Indians and successfully requested permission to take some pueblo water from the high mountain valleys and the crest of the Jicarilla Mountain. The water was to be diverted from the western watershed whose tributaries followed a natural course into the Río Grande. The plan included an ingenious scheme to cut an irrigation canal into the rock and across the mountain into the Mora Valley. The water taken by Olguín and the settlers flowed into one of three branches of the Río Pueblo that irrigated the farmlands lying within the Picurís Pueblo land grant.[8]

The *acequia* was connected to the middle branch of the headwaters of the Río Pueblo. Through hard labor and native ingenuity, the people were able to defy the gravitational flow of water in places, elevating it until they created a major diversion into the Mora Valley along the eastern watershed. Although the exact date that the *acequia* was constructed is unknown, testimony provided in 1882 stated that the water from the middle branch of the Río Pueblo was taken "many years ago, . . . by the individual Antonio Olguín. . . . [who] was allowed to take this water."[9] In view of this evidence, the *acequia* had to be constructed before 1832, since Olguín did not return to San Antonio with the families who resettled the valley in 1835.

The mountain *acequia*, that carried badly needed water to the families at San Antonio, brought new hope for the settlers, and in all probability, the expectation that the area would continue to grow and prosper. All of this was abruptly interrupted, however, when increased incursions by the nomadic tribes forced the temporary abandonment of the Mora Valley, as reported by Pike in 1832. The people retreated to the sanctuary and security of the settlements they had left in 1816. In 1834, a second effort to settle the Mora Valley at the former location of "Valle de San Antonio" and a new site at "Valle de Santa Gertrudis" at the lower end of the valley was carried out by Miguel Mascareñas and a handful of people. That year a few families began to construct homes. That effort continued in 1835 when 76 families, again led by Mascareñas, petitioned for the offical Mora Land Grant. On October 20, 1835, lands to the grant were officially distributed to the people as a colonization community grant by Manuel Antonio Sánchez, constitutional justice of the jurisdiction of San José de Las Trampas, following approval by Governor Albino Pérez.[10] It appears that

only ten of the original families who lived in Mora in 1818 returned to reclaim and settle their lands in 1835.

The original families who settled the Mora Valley were largely from Las Trampas, Chamisal, and Santa Bárbara [Peñasco]. Water brought into the valley through Olguín's mountain *acequia*, constructed during the time of the first settlement, along with that provided by the Mora River, temporarily met the irrigation and domestic needs of the people. After much of the choice, irrigable land was taken, settlers at the new communities of El Rito de Agua Negra [Chacón] and Agua Negra [Holman] began to encounter a dearth of water for their crops.

As the growing population sought relief from insufficient farmland and a scarcity of water, some families were forced to make an exodus further east and out of the Mora Valley. As early as 1837, residents at Santa Gertrudis de lo de Mora petitioned the Alcalde at Las Trampas for lands at another mountain valley higher up in the mountains. Their plea emphasized that they were requesting new lands due to a shortage of water at the lower end of the valley where they lived:

> . . . due to the necessity which finds us without water at this residence, we proclaim to your charitable goodness for God's sake; and in the name of divine law, we hereby request that you find it worthy to allow us to take possession of the Valle de Guadalupita, Río del Coyote to cultivate and sustain ourselves. . .[11]

At Agua Negra and Chacón, those settlers who were adamant in remaining in the Mora Valley were copious of the scheme carried out years before by Antonio Olguín at San Antonio. The snow melt and rivulets which trickled into the Mora River seldom carried sufficient water to meet the growing demands of the people. They usually had to depend on additional rainfall to water their crops, and many times a dry season would bring a meager harvest and bitter disappointment. These people developed two other ingenious irrigation systems which diverted water from the two remaining branches of the Río Pueblo.

Sometime prior to 1865, the people from the Chacón area began construction on another mountain *acequia*, taking water from the northern branch of the Río Pueblo for their own use. This ditch which continues in use to the present was referred to as the "*Acequia de El Rito y La Sierra,*" and it first began irrigating the farm plots of Chacón in 1865. Other valley

residents today refer to it as the "*Acequia de la Presa y la Sierra*" because it begins its course at a holding dam built by the people at the top of the mountain. The reservoir collects and retains water until it is released to the lower valley in early spring.[12]

One of the current *comisionados* of the "*Acequia de El Rito y La Sierra*" is Pedro Abeyta from Chacón. His grandfather, Jesús Romero y Durán, worked on the *acequia's* construction, and oral history passed down by the family revealed that the men who built the ditch would go to the mountain and camp out all week while they worked. It appears that it took them about three years to construct the ditch, and Abeyta said, "the work they did. . . it is a miracle the way they did it, because they did not have any tools in those days. My grandfather told me. There were places where they cut the rock. The cliffs. . . they cut the rock so they could pass the water, and in those days we did not have the engineers we have today. Consequently, they did an excellent job for those days."[13]

In the spring, members of the Chacón *acequia* drive twenty-five miles to the top of the mountain and begin cleaning the canal. If they were to climb the steep slope along the course of the ditch, it would only be about five miles, according to Abeyta. During the annual spring cleaning, the *acequia* members takes axes, shovels and chain saws with them. They clear the ditch and the *presa* or dam at the top of the relief. Once the cleaning is completed and the water is released around May 15, a spectacular waterfall cascades to the bottom at a spot known as "El Quemado." From there, it begins to provide irrigation for the lands in the Chacón areas.[14]

At one time the U.S. Forest Service wrote to Chacón irrigators telling them that they would have to pay for the water they were taking from the *acequia*. Some of the members gathered old records and documents relating to the *acequia's* history, and they traveled to Taos to arbitrate the issue with the government. It was finally determined that since the *Acequia de El Rito y la Sierra* had existed long before the Forest Service, the people would not have to pay for the water.[15]

In 1879, plans were laid out for yet another transmountain *acequia* which would take water from the third and final branch of the Río Pueblo—the southern branch. By this time the growing county of Mora had reached a population of 12,000.[16] After the establishment of Ft. Union in 1851, military protection allowed for the expansion of new communities to new mountain valleys and the vast plains which stretched to the Texas border. Three thousand residents were now confined to the Mora Valley

which extended from El Rito de Agua Negra [Chacón] to La Cueva. The population at Agua Negra [Holman] had now reached 500 people,[17] and the proverbial water and irrigation problem was causing much concern and once again threatened the survival of the community.

Juan Bautista Guerín, the parish priest at Santa Gertrudis, met with the residents of Agua Negra, whereupon they agreed to engage fourteen men in the construction of the third stream or branch of the Río Pueblo on the west side of the crest of the Jicarilla Mountain. When they reached the stream, they also built a dam across it to hold the water which would be diverted to the fields at Agua Negra. After three years of arduous, backbreaking toil, the *acequia* was completed; and on April 1882, the water was turned into the new "*Acequia de la Sierra.*"[18]

Today, the *Acequia de la Sierra* continues to supply irrigation to the communities of Holman, Cleveland, and Mora. The current *mayordomo*, sixty-year-old Jake Sánchez, talks about the *acequia* which meanders about fifteen miles before it reaches the community of Holman where its present seventy eight members begin to irrigate their pastures, alfalfa fields and gardens, throughout its course to the lower end of the valley. In 1985, heavy mountain runoff damaged the *acequia* in the higher elevations, and fallen timber and other debris created blockages and water loss. Seven thousand dollars in disaster funds were allocated to the *acequia* group, and a bulldozer and other equipment was used to repair and clear the channel.[19]

Older *acequia* members recounted how their grandparents labored for months and even years in the construction of the *acequia* which brought water to Agua Negra. Eusebio Arellano once recollected that the people "were poorly equipped," when they dug out the "*Acequia de la Sierra.*" He said, "everyone worked—men, women, and children. The ditch was for everyone, and everyone helped build it." He also spoke of the protest lodged by the Picurís Indians when water from the headwaters of the Río Pueblo were diverted and crossed to the eastern watershed of the mountains into the Mora Valley. He claimed that people were killed and buried on the mountain during the three years it took to build the ditch.[20]

It is uncertain whether actual fighting took place between the inhabitants from Agua Negra and the Picurís Indians. However, construction of the last mountain *acequia* in the Mora Valley did not go unchallenged. In July 1882 Governor Juan Pando of Picurís Pueblo filed a complaint on behalf of his people in the Taos District Court. Named as defendants in the complaint were Migual García and twenty-two other

residents from the Agua Negra area.[21]

The Indians claimed that since they received their Pueblo land grant from the King of Spain in 1689, they had been entitled to the full, free and undisturbed possession of all the water of the streams and branches of the Río Pueblo which naturally flowed upon their land for domestic use, sustaining their animals, and for supplying their gardens and fields. They argued that they should still retain those rights to enjoy the natural flow of water from all the branches of the river. Their complaint further stated

> . . . that without the use and benefit of all said water from said branches and streams aforesaid, their said lands and gardens, fields and homes and grant of land would be wholly or nearly so worthless to them that they could not enjoy the benefits of their said grant of land assured and patented to them as aforesaid that they would be reduced to absolute want and starvation and impartibly ruined. . .[22]

The Picurís Indians said that they had always and were still protesting the diversion and use of the water in the two *acequias*—the one at Chacón and the present one at Agua Negra. They never mentioned the first *acequia* dug by Antonio Olguín many years before, lending credence to the claim that permission to dig the ditch had been granted by them. The claimants sought a permanent injunction against the defendants which would prevent them from using the dam and ditch for the purpose of diverting the natural flow of the described branches of the Río Pueblo which prevented them from the full use and benefit of the water which flowed in those streams. T.B. Catron, who had vested interest in the Mora Land Grant, represented the defendants from Agua Negra. He sought to have the complaint dismissed by the court for "want of prosecution." On October 6, 1885, the court dismissed the complaint "without prejudice to any of the rights of said complainants,. . ."[23]

For many years after the Mora Valley was settled, the productive soil in the area yielded good crops, and with adequate irrigation water, the survival of the self sufficient economy and society prevailed. Some of the earlier traditional crops grown by the people were beans, corn, onions, peas, beets, cabbages, squash, chile, lentils, and radishes. A native tobacco *(punche mexicano)* was also grown by a few families. The valley was well adapted to fruit growing, and many orchards bearing peaches, apricots, pears

and apples dotted the lands along the banks of the irrigation *acequias* and Mora River. Wild plums *(ciruela cimarrona)* and choke cherries *(capulín)* were plentiful and palatable favorites of the people.

The Mora Valley also became the first major agricultural area of New Mexico to be settled by American farmers as well as by German, Irish, and French immigrants, some prior to 1850. After Fort Union was established, the permanence of these newcomers to the valley became more pronounced, and many intermarried among the Hispanic population. These new settlers introduced different farming techniques and new varieties of fruit such as the German prune and Richmond cherry which had good yields and produced superior fruit.[24]

During the 1860s, the Mora Valley and other settlements throughout the Mora Land Grant were crossed by thousands of American traders, trappers, government officials, soldiers and new settlers coming to New Mexico. Most were on their way to or from Santa Fe and Fort Union. A profitable trade soon developed between the farmers of the Mora Valley and these travelers. Fort Union and communities outside the Mora Grant became major customers to the grains, produce and fruit produced in the valley. Local farmers also provided many provisions for departing caravans on the Santa Fe Trail.[25]

During this period of prosperity, farmers in the valley concentrated on raising wheat, corn, oats, and fruits, providing a commercial stimulus and economic diversity to the self-sufficient economy of earlier years. Grist mills were erected, and for decades they ground the wheat grown in valley and surrounding area. Mora remained the leading agricultural valley in New Mexico until commercialized companies began to develop irrigation and agricultural enterprises in the southern part of the territory at the turn of the century. The fertility and productivity of the Mora Land Grant was reported in the *Las Vegas Gazette* in 1881:

> The native vegetables are the best grown anywhere. Cabbage, beets, turnips, radishes, etc., attain great size and are sweet and well flavored. Potatoes in the higher mountains grown to perfection, and onions in the valleys cannot be surpassed in the world.[26]

Irrigated crops in the Mora Valley were producing some of the following yields: wheat, 25 bushels per acre; oats, 40 bushels per acre; corn, a hybrid produced with the old New Mexico variety and the "King

Phillip" brought from the eastern states yielded 28 bushels per acre. French green beans *(alubias)*, pinto beans, peas, and other beans also grew well. Hops used in beer making equaled the best grown in New York, producing 800 to 1,000 pounds per acre.[27]

The economic mainstay of the residents was their agricultural production along with their small flocks of sheep and goats and a few cattle. Money circulated in the valley bringing about the establishment of general stores by French and German merchants. People who did not have any currency could barter for the clothing or merchandise they needed. Saloon and dance halls also appeared, and they were patronized by the local residents, travelers and soldiers from nearby Fort Union.

Devout religious practices which had spiritually sustained the people through the tribulations of their early settlements in the valley were still a major part of their daily lives. On one occasion in 1882, the four Catholic parishes of the Mora Valley held a religious mission to honor one of their patron saints. An observer reported that "Much of the work in the Mora Valley, including the irrigation of the farm lands, was called off that day so that all the people could attend the religious festivities."[28]

Despite the bountiful crops and improved livelihoods the people enjoyed during the latter 1800s, the water situation continued unstable and tenuous. The winter of 1889 brought blizzards and record snows to New Mexico, causing at least nine deaths among cowboys and sheepherders in the eastern plains near Clayton. Hundreds of cattle and 26,000 sheep were reported frozen to death in the heavy snowfall which drifted as high as eight feet in places. One individual in Mora envisioned the snows as a blessing for the following year's crops when he stated that the snowfall would provide

> . . . an unlimited supply of water for spring, when it is not needed, and the settlers in the mountain valleys in this vicinity should go to work, now that there is time to do it, to build substantial reservoirs for the storage of water for the irrigation of lands late in the spring or during the early summer. The last two seasons have demonstrated that during dry spells there is not sufficient water on hand for the irrigation of lands now under cultivation.[29]

The same construction of dams across mountain canyons had been recommended to the farmers of La Cebolla, Agua Negra, El Rito,

Guadalupita, Lucero and other communities since October, long before the snows came. For many years the people in the Mora Valley were aware that the mountain snows facing south melted quickly in early spring, leaving but a trickle in the Mora River and mountain streams during late summer when water was still needed for irrigation. The following summer of 1890, the people experienced yet another dry spell, but the heavy winter snows kept the *acequias* running through the beginning of the full harvest. Farmers were optimistic that they would glean a good harvest which would help them recover their losses from the year before.[30]

Another irrigation plan for Mora County was presented in 1890 by the wealthy Rafael Romero from La Cueva. He spoke about artesian water deposits which were known to exist at Mora and other places in the county. Once the land titles were settled, Romero was confident that Mora County became a showplace for the "fairest fields, gardens and orchards in the west."[31]

During the late 1880s and early 1890s, a different type of economic activity developed on the Mora Land Grant. Copper deposits were discovered, and private mining companies quickly surfaced to exploit the ore which also contained traces of silver and gold. Mica (*talco*), iron and coal were also found, but it appears that these mineral deposits were of a low grade.[32] Only the copper ore turned any kind of profit for the investors, and the mining ventures of the land grant were subsequently shortlived.[33] Larger yields in the ore deposits would have escalated the mining activity, placing an additional drain of the hard pressed water resources of the Mora Valley.

For many years after New Mexico was first organized into a territory in 1851, laws dealing with irrigation and water rights drew much attention and debate from legislators and citizens. Governor James S. Calhoun advocated strongly for irrigation, and he agreed that those laws dealing with irrigation and water should have priority over the rest.[34] In 1890, one of various Constitutional Conventions which convened in New Mexico during the Territorial Period was called to Santa Fe to draft and amend a constitution which would be submitted to the voting public for approval or defeat. *El Eco de Mora* alerted the people to the matter in its editorial columns, urging them to contact their delegates on the all important issue of water and irrigation which affected two-thirds of the county's population at that time. The newspaper declared that irrigation should receive paramount attention at the convention, "so that the fundamentals law of the prospective State of

New Mexico will be in accord with the absolute requirements of our farmers and the photographic characteristics of our valleys and farmlands."[35]

Technological changes and a new economic order brought to New Mexico, following the arrival of the railroad in 1878, radically affected the prosperity the Mora Valley had enjoyed for decades. The railroad quickly caused the demise of the Santa Fe Trail, eliminating the demand for supplies and foodstuffs the valley had provided travelers and caravans of the trail. In 1891 Fort Union closed its doors, and the demand for grain, hay, flour an produce from the valley came to a halt. Despite these economic setbacks, the people remained largely self-sufficient. By the turn of the century others had problems adjusting to the societal changes, and they began to leave the villages seeking seasonal work to supplement their income. Many fanned out to states such as Wyoming, Colorado, and Utah to work for the railroad, sheepherding, and as migrant farm workers for large farming concerns.

Seasonal out-migrations from the Mora Valley continued through the 1930s as people maintained their attachment to the picturesque environment which had given them stability for generations. After World War II, many families finally made a permanent exit, as they sought better livelihoods in the urban areas of the Southwest. Those who chose to remain eventually felt the full effect of large farming corporations on their once productive, diversified farming practices.

Today, the irrigated plots of land remain under ten acres in size, and since it is now cheaper to purchase wheat, corn, and other grains produced in the midwest and other farming belts, crops in the valley are now limited to gardens for home use, alfalfa and different types of grasses for pasturing and feeding livestock. Farming methods have radically changed in the Mora Valley since the first families settled there in 1816, but the *acequias* which were cut into the mountain continue to flow every year, and irrigation practices among *mayordomos, comisionados* and *parciantes* remain unchanged.

## ENDNOTES

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2. Chávez, "Early Settlements in the Mora Valley," 318.

3. Alvar Carlson, "El Rancho and Vadito: Spanish Settlements on Indian Land Grants," *El Palacio*, Vol. 85 (1979), 34.

4. E.V. Long Collection, New Mexico State Records Center and Archives, Santa Fe. A document in this collection mentions Olguín as one of the first settlers. The 1816 settlement date has been established from the first baptismal records for San Antonio de lo de Mora.

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12. E.V. Long Collection, Untitled document; Taos County Court Case No. 256.

13. Interview with Pedro Abeyta, Chacón, New Mexico, February 19, 1986.

14. Interview with Pedro Abeyta.

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23. Taos County Court Case No. 256.

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27. "El Condado de Mora," *Revista Católica*, Vol. 7 (1881), 441-442.

28. *Revista Católica*, Vol. 8 (1882), 136-137.

29. *La Crónica de Mora*, November 30, 1890.

30. *El Eco de Mora*, August 12, 1890.

31. *El Eco de Mora*, August 12, 1890.

32. *Mora Gazette*, July 31, 1890.

33. Twitchell, *History of New Mexico*, 4: 649.

34. James S. Calhoun, "Message to the Legislature," June 2, 1851, *New Mexico Territorial Papers*, *complete.

35. *El Eco de Mora,* July 1, 1890.