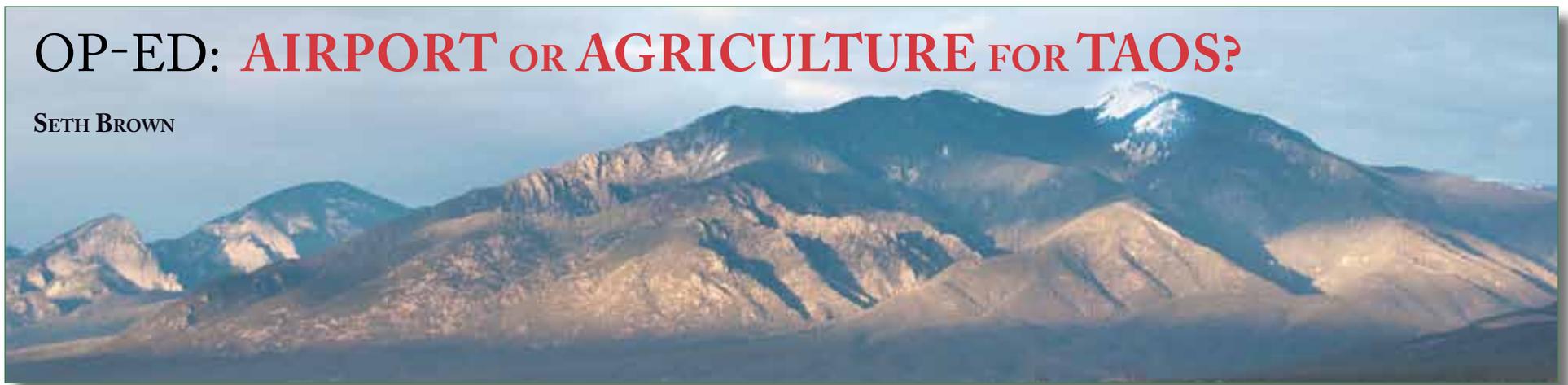


OP-ED: AIRPORT OR AGRICULTURE FOR TAOS?

SETH BROWN



© Anna C. Hansen

Many people in Taos see what the Taos Valley could be. Taos is a beautiful, old community with major untapped potential for growing enough food to feed a large local population. There are also people—fewer in number—who see how much quick money can be made by converting our valley into a city. A real economy is not dependent on a fraudulent, unstable financial system. Unfortunately, the Taos economy for the past 30 years has become dependent on this kind of development.

A prominent real-estate agent in Taos claims that a larger airport is essential to building a city here. He

is right about that, but he is wrong in his claim that covering our farmland with buildings, roads and parking lots will restore hope for young people. It is our farmland and the water that flows through the acequias that are the real hope for our community. Thousands of acres of irrigated land in Taos could grow food every year as long as water flows from the mountains, but not if the land lies buried under a city. This seems obvious, but it is not something that developers want to think about as they envision their bank accounts filling with profits.

Go to taosnews.com and search “Pavel Lukes in support of airport expansion.”

His message reveals quite a bit about what is going on.

Here are some development schemes of times past: Arthur Manby, who faked his death and moved to México when the people realized what he was planning; Indian Camp Dam in the late 1960s; the plan to spray Agent Orange on the acequias all over Taos county in 1979; and seven other major developments that were opposed by small groups

of Taoseños. Since 1970, I have joined all of these efforts to stop harmful development. The opposition succeeded, except for two of them. The airport expansion isn't decided yet, but it is a door to many schemes cooking in Taos, so it's been the most difficult to stop. The success of all the previous efforts to thwart development, ironically, is part of the reason Taos is now a juicy target for developers.

A funny story about stopping developers in Taos:

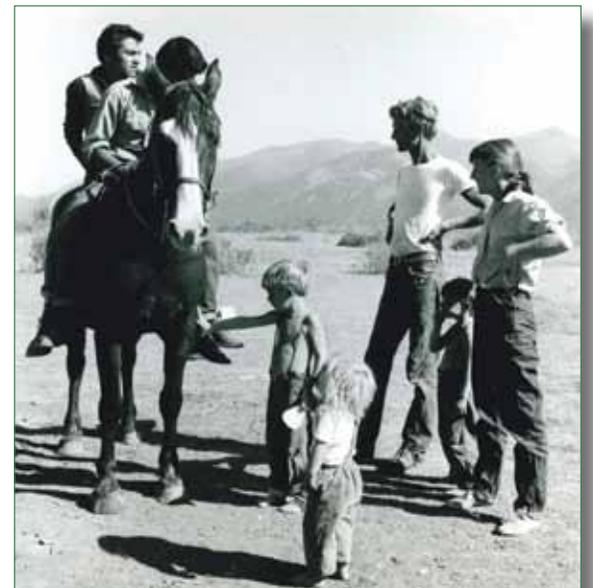
The year I was born, 1951, Edward Abbey, author of *The Monkey Wrench Gang*, and his family moved into a little, dirt-roofed compound my family lived in on north Edith Blvd., in Albuquerque. We all returned to Taos in the mid-1950s and shared to survive, until Ed left in the mid-1960s.

Opposing developers in the Taos area in the 1950s went something like this:

a developer put up signs advertising home sites in the Fort Burgwin area, so Abbey, my dad Malcolm, and John Depuy—who told me this story—went there in the middle of the night to cut down the signs. They heard someone else sawing in the dark. Spud Johnson, *Taos News* “Gadfly” columnist, was there doing the same thing. A week later, the developer came into the newspaper office, where Ed was editor, and asked Ed if anyone had been caught cutting the signs. Ed said he hadn't heard anything but would look into it and let the developer know. (Rent the video *Lonely Are the Brave* with Kirk Douglas. Filmed in the Albuquerque area in 1960, it was taken from a book by Abbey about development and government officials.)

Here's one of the things many of

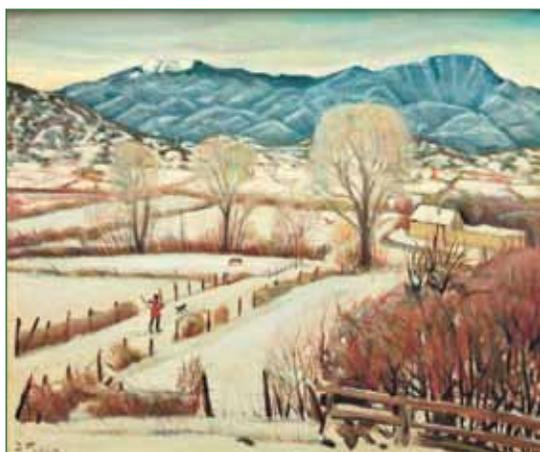
us think will happen if the airport expansion succeeds: wherever there are rivers emerging from mountains in desert areas like Taos, cities are being built that bury under concrete the very farmland that gave birth to settlement. If this seems improbable, google “more accessible areas in western America where rivers emerge from



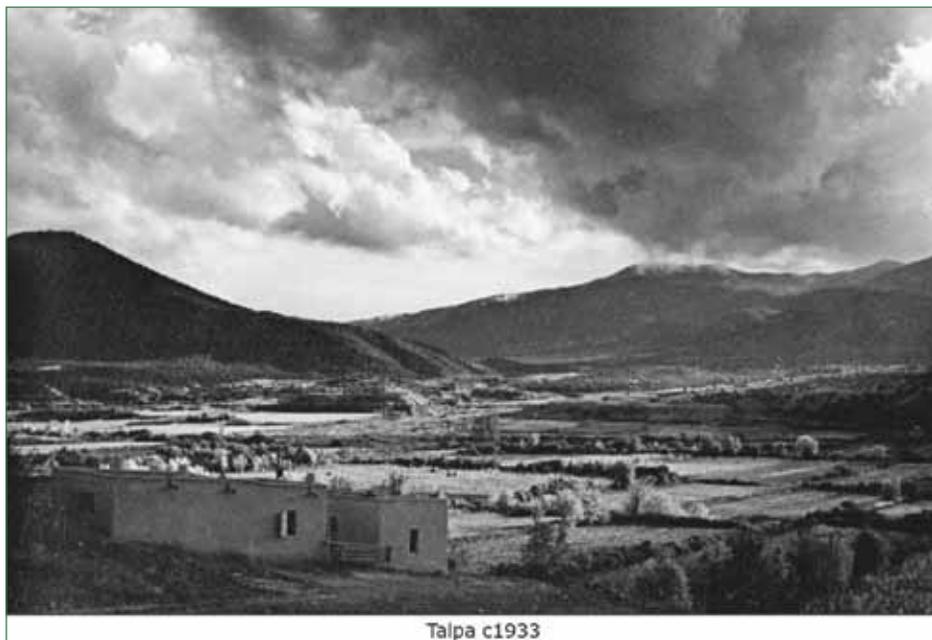
Neighbors visit the Brown's 10-acre homestead in Arroyo Seco in 1956

the mountains.” The farmland is gone. Denver and Phoenix are cities where it was popular to cut down all the orchards for development. In the 1950s and '60s almost all of the fruit trees—even in privately owned yards—were cut down and replaced with inedible ornamentals because no one was picking fruit, so it rotted and made a mess.

World War II marked a turning point in northern New Mexico. Many people stopped growing food. Now in Taos, many dream of returning to a life connected to growing food on the land, and some of us are trying to find ways to slow the destruction of the farmland. This is the heart of why we are opposing the airport expansion. It is a difficult effort because of the big money that can be made by converting the farm fields into a city.



Painting by Joseph Fleck



Talpa c1933

Talpa ridge of the Ranchos de Taos valley. Joseph Fleck's house is in the foreground.

Courtesy Altermann Gallery

© John Collier Jr. (2)

As soon as the effort to oppose the airport started up again, when the new Taos City Council was elected in the spring of 2014, a war of words started, with each side trying to educate people about what the future holds with the airport plan. It is a complicated situation to decipher, but at least there is discussion now, owing to the efforts to make the deliberations public instead of being done behind closed doors, as the developers wanted.

where 90 percent were opposed. Two of the five councilors, Fritz Hahn and Judy Cantú, attended and both voted their opposition. The three councilors who did not attend voted to continue the project. This shows that our system of government doesn't work.

Many people in Taos are tired of this, so now there is a lawsuit in support of giving the people a voice to express their thoughts and feelings to county officials who have the power to decide the future of our farmland and our native culture. What is the true cost of the kinds of jobs the airport supporters promise? It isn't as simple as they claim. Hopefully, the county will notice when the people come to speak.

My family bought irrigated land in Arroyo Seco in 1955, at \$200 per acre. That

homestead was sold in 1973 to settle a divorce. I tried to reassemble the little farm beginning in 1975, building it up to 11 acres by 2006. The last little bit I bought cost more than \$120,000 per acre, 600 times the cost of what it was in 1955. Bankrupt in 2008, I'm now starting

from scratch to create another farm in Arroyo Hondo where land costs less.

Skilled labor in 1955 was \$1 per hour in Taos; now it's \$20 per hour. It's worse if minimum-wage statistics are used; that wage increase from 1955 to 2006 is about 10 times as much. Picture the price of irrigated land in Taos rising twice as fast as wages that can be earned. That would be a problem but could be managed. The cost of irrigated land rising 30 times faster than wages is catastrophic for working people, and it is spelling extinction for what maybe the oldest agricultural community north of México.

Councilor Judy Cantú, in reference to airport expansion, gave us a little bit of wisdom: "In Santa Fe, they kept the buildings and moved the people out."

Obviously, this does not bode well for working people, the environment or the native cultures in Taos. An expanded

airport to attract as much wealth as possible would not be good for Taos. ☒

Seth Brown's family moved to Taos in 1945. For further information, google "Seth Brown My Turn Taos News." Email sethb777@gmail.com

EDITOR'S NOTE: On Dec. 23, acting Taos County Planning Director Edward Vigil approved the permit application for the \$24 million airport expansion. The airport is owned and operated by the Town of Taos. Vigil's approval means the town can technically break ground on the project now. Most of the project's cost is to be covered by the state and federal governments.

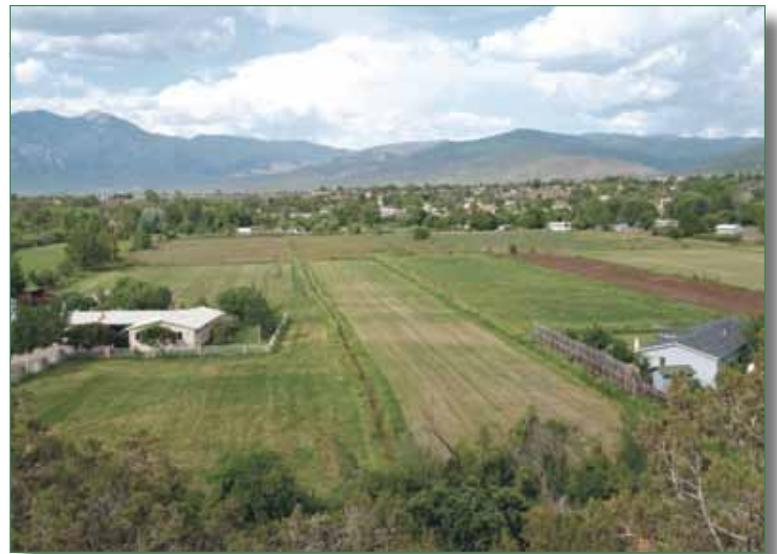


Seth Brown (center) on the family farm in 1956

One example of misinformation is the claim that Taos Pueblo approves of the expansion. This is not the case, even though our previous mayor did make a deal reversing the pueblo's long-standing resolution opposing the airport, opening the door to expansion. Our group has found no one at the pueblo now supporting the airport. Another pro-airport statement that appears often is that "the opponents are a small group of radicals who don't represent the majority." Our petition effort revealed the opposite is true.

It is our farmland and the water that flows through the acequias that are the real hope for our community.

There always was a simple, inexpensive way for town and county officials to decide the airport issue and avoid all the money that has been wasted in the effort to force the expansion on an unwilling population. Just pay close attention to the rooms packed full of people protesting the expansion for 28 years, content throughout the Environmental Impact Statement (EIS), and now as seen at the recent forum in the City Council chamber,



Ranchos de Taos farmland

© Anna C. Hansen

Restore Let us add new life to your traditional adobe home.

Unplug Go off-grid with a sustainable getaway of your very own.

PKworks.org
505.699.9416

Enlighten Unique backyard retreats, from tea huts to decks.

Brighten Bring the summer back with your very own sunroom.

© John Collier Jr.