Prior to 1975, an old man lived near Tres Piedras, about 70 miles from Ghost Ranch, on a ten acre tract of land in a house built by his grandfather in his youth. No one knows for sure the date of construction of the house or occupancy of the land, but it most certainly predated 1905-6 when President Theodore Roosevelt by fiat created the Carson National Forest. Ever since that occurred the land has been officially U.S. Forest Service land.

To be sure there was a provision for owners of private property to have their land excluded from the Federal ownership, but in this and numerous other cases, it was never exercised. Perhaps the youthful owner was not informed, or in the simplistic approach to issues still current among many of our neighbors, he simply felt “It’s my land; I know it, my neighbors know it - let it be.”

To digress for a moment, some of that same simplistic approach led to the occupation of the County Courthouse in Tierra Amarilla a few years ago when a group of land grant claimants, carrying guns, descended upon the small village in trucks and cars, their intent to exercise a citizens arrest upon the District Attorney whom they felt was exceeding his authority illegally and prejudicially. In the process, a state policeman was seriously wounded, the sheriff beaten, jailer wounded; they held the courthouse for a couple of hours, shot up a state police car, departed with hostages, and the next day we had tanks and government vehicles all over the country!

Back to our Tres Piedras trespass, illegal squatter situation. It well could be also that the ancestor was in no way inclined to get into an “anglo” court with a question of land ownership. Remember this country was settled by Europeans before the pilgrims came to Plymouth Rock - the Spanish moving from Mexico over the majestic mountains and broad deserts, followed the water courses of New Mexico. Santa Fe's historic Palace of the Governors was constructed in 1608 and is still in use. And Santa Fe was not the first Spanish Capital in New Mexico.

Then in 1810, Padre Hidalgo with his “Grito de Dolores” calling from the church towers in Dolores began the Mexican Revolution, and after 1821, New Mexico was Mexican territory until the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, 1848, settled the United States war with Mexico. In this action of aggrandizement, the U.S. acquired vast territories in the Southwest - California, Nevada, Utah, most of Arizona and New Mexico, and part of Colorado and Wyoming.

The Mexican residents could either go to Mexico or remain here with promise of all the rights and privileges of U.S. citizens.

However, the “anglos” poured in, vast tracts of land passed into their hands, some legally, fairly, much technically legal, but unethical. Cases of fraud were numerous. Spanish land grants were declared invalid, community land grants were stripped of their surrounding public domain designated for support of the community. New, unfamiliar patterns of taxation provided opportunity for seizure based on failure to pay overdue taxes. It was only in the 1890's that the U.S. got around to creating a court of Private Land Claims and given the history and experience of the time, no wonder that a native owner of a small tract of land would not be anxious to enter that arena.
In any case, even though the District Ranger, the Carson Forest Supervisor, the Regional Office of the Forest Service, might recognize that historically and ethically that the ten acres should be a fee simple title to the occupants, the grandfather's descendants, it remained as U.S. Forest Service land - property of the United States of America.

The Forest cannot sell land or give it away. The old gentleman's only recourse: (1) an act of Congress recognizing his claim - a remote possibility since most of the representatives are wary of opening such a Pandora's Box; or (2) a land exchange - whereby one may acquire by purchase a tract of land within a National Forest that is worth more than that property owned, has all the mineral rights intact and a warrantable clear title. Then the Forest may trade with him, if it is so disposed and if it offers evidence of gain to the government. If one is a small owner with limited means and legal experience, this becomes almost literally an impossibility. The old gentleman was not alone. Many families had similar problems.

The government did not press its claims. But none of the occupants could sell their property, mortgage it, or even borrow money for home improvements. In their eyes the land was theirs; to the Federal Government, it was National Forest land. Thus was the bitterness of Anglo-Hispanic relations dragged into the mid-twentieth century.

To this problem, the great land exchange was addressed.

Shortly after Ghost Ranch was given to the Board of Christian Education by Arthur and Phoebe Pack in October of 1955, Arthur Pack and Bill Carr began construction of the Ghost Ranch Museum over on the highway. Bill Carr was a naturalist and conservationist whose career included participation in the development and direction of Bear Mountain State Park on the Hudson in New York State. Arthur was a former editor of Nature Magazine. While in Tucson they were responsible for the beginning and development of the Desert Museum, now a major educational and visitor attraction in the Southwest.

They had a vision of a living museum interpreting the need for soil conservation, the protection of the ecology and flora and fauna of the area. With buildings designed by Architect Will Harris who has been the architect for Ghost Ranch all these years, it soon also included the "Beaver National Forest" officially dedicated by the Chief of the U.S. Forest Service. This small plot on the grounds was leased to the Forest Service and was an early demonstration site for the multi-use concept of the National Forests.

The personal resources of Arthur Pack combined with trust funds from the Charles Lathrop Pack Foundation were the financial base for the museum construction and operation. The time came when in order to insure its future, Arthur, on a trip to Washington, offered the museum to the U.S. Forest Service. With it would come allocations from trust funds to help continue and expand its services. The Forest Service was pleased to accept the offer. However, a problem; the land and the buildings were the property of the Ghost Ranch Conference Center. My recommendation to the Board of Christian Education was that we give the property freely, but that we seek a land exchange in the process. The recommendation was approved.

When I met with officials of the U.S. Forest Service in that early small office here at the ranch, they were highly pleased with the proposed action and said in effect, "Fine Jim, and what else do you want?" — assuming that the land exchange to clear title for us to part of our tent and trailer area which had been in process for several years was the subject of my concern. I replied that it was not that which I had in mind, but that I understood that there were in the Santa Fe and Carson Forest approximately 125 problem tracts of land to which ownership was in question - owned legally by the Forest but historically claimed by residents of the area. The ranch touches or adjoins both of these National Forests. I said, "You men know that even if you had ten 'land men' working on those problems, some of them would not be resolved in your lifetime. Why don't you put together all of those claims possible against the appraised value of the museum land and buildings, and the land which we will give you in order to include the tract within the boundaries of the Carson Forest?
Put it all together - and then we will give you the land and buildings, you give us title to the disputed tracts, and we in turn will give them to the people.”

Thanks to the vision of M. J. Hassell, at the time Supervisor of the Carson Forest, they bought into the dream. Progress was made with full cooperation and support at every level of the Forest Service. Because something of that scale had not been done before, it eventually required an act of Congress.

I can remember the executive aide of a congressman in Washington chiding us with some amusement saying, “You folks have no idea of the troubles and problems you are undertaking.”

I suggested that the two forests, the Santa Fe and the Carson, knowing the problems better than we, select, on the basis of difficulty of other resolution, the tracts to be exchanged and that they be responsible for the appraisals required.

When this was accomplished we had a meeting here at the ranch of all persons affected, those whose lands would be involved, and Forest Service personnel from the immediate areas as well as those at district and regional levels.

We all knew there would be hours, days, months of long hard work - and problems of course. I suggested to the proposed recipients that we create a “land panel”. Those of the Santa Fe Forest would choose a representative, so also those of the Carson Forest, and that I would appoint a third person, not a recipient, to be chairman. We would provide this panel with a lawyer, and a surveyor, provide stipends and expenses as necessary, and leave it to the panel to work it out.

The land panel was made up of Carl Bode of the Santa Fe, Juan Andres Griego, for the Carson, and Vicente Martinez of Taos as chairman. The surveyor was Joseph Lujan; the lawyer, William Gilbert of Santa Fe who had done a great deal of quiet title work in the area. Both Joe Lujan and Bill Gilbert gave of their skills and expertise at far less than standard rates, and without their dedication and patience, and that of the panel members, the project could never have been completed.

It took almost six years, lots of red tape, and considerable money. In the process the Ghost Ranch, i.e. the Board of Christian Education, at one time held title to one-half of the village of Canones, a Roman Catholic Church, two penitente Moradas, and a campo santo (cemetery)!

On April 6, 1975, on a great day of celebration with a representative of the Governor of New Mexico, a happy witness, deeds were distributed here at Ghost Ranch to all who could be present. When it was done we had cleared title for 111 families and extraneous properties as mentioned above.

In more than a hundred years of bitter history this remains as the only significant major effort to resolve problems of land ownership in Northern New Mexico. Those who have seen the movie, “Ghost Ranch - The Magic Place”, may remember Dr. Myra Ellen Jenkins, State Archivist, saying to a group of students here at Ghost Ranch, “From one-half to two-thirds of the land titles in Northern New Mexico are clouded, and if you do not have clear title to your land, then you and your grandchildren are in a constant state of jeopardy."

And Father Bob Kirsch, then our priest of Saint Thomas Parish, and still member of the Ghost Ranch Foundation Board, saying, “For the Gringo, land is something you buy and sell to make money with - but for us, La tierra es la vida. The land is our life!”

Ten years later - aftermath - some land has been sold, most retained by our neighbors, for which we are grateful. The Forest Service moves to expand and upgrade the Visitors Center on the Highway. I serve as Vice-President of its Board helping to continue Arthur Pack’s and Bill Carr’s hopes for education for better care and use of the land by its occupants.

In all Ghost Ranch’s history of service and ministry, the Land Exchange still stands as a major accomplishment and contribution to the stability and security of life for our neighbors. With proud humility we are grateful to all who helped make it possible. As Jack Purdy once noted - It was a time when “Charity kissed Justice”.

Jim Hall
Director Ghost Ranch