

Valley of Life

At the top of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, the high meadows and dark timber of Valle Vidal store a lot of lore and keep a lot of secrets.

JESSE MARTINEZ RIDES a good horse. One that holds steady when he flushes a stampede of elk from an aspen grove. One that can pick its way through dark timber or over a scree field without stumbling into injury or exhaustion. Like anyone using horses in high country, he needs one that's got enough mountain savvy to get him home at the end of every day. And the rugged country of Valle Vidal, Jesse's summertime post, is plenty to try a horse.

Valle Vidal is a roughly 102,000-acre parcel of high meadows and mixed forest at the crest of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, just south of the Colorado line. On the west side of the Valle, Comanche and Costilla creeks drain the broad, treeless valleys, running cool and clear and full of trout in their meandering descent. The east side of the Valle, as it breaks from the rocky highlands, spreads in a wide apron of park-like ponderosa stands ringing the meadows. Although walking the land is as easy as navigating with a map and compass, there aren't many hiking trails in the Valle, and only a single dirt road bisects the area, which is under Forest Service management.

Other than a few times each year, the Valle sees little traffic. Which gives Jesse plenty of time to look over the country from the back of a horse. The one he's riding this morning, Maverick, looks a bit like the dun horse from the 1982 film *The Man from Snowy River*—wiry, tough, and workmanlike in his movements. "He's mostly mustang," Jesse says as we light out from camp with the morning sun low and the pine groves still cool. Jesse has spent a lot of time in the area and now works as host of the McCrystal Campground, on the east side of the Valle. He wants to show me a grave, he says, and that's where we're headed now, making good time in that direction.

We cross the dirt road and head south at a high trot over the grama grass meadows, turned umber with the coming autumn. Grasshoppers scatter

before the horses. An Abert's squirrel darts for cover at the edge of the pines.

"It'll be a cold winter, I think," Jesse says over his shoulder. He's a man of few words, and when he talks it's almost in a whisper, as though to avoid being heard by anyone or any animal within earshot. As we move through the forest, his head constantly swivels in observation, from the forest floor to the crowns of the pines to the elk trails we're paralleling. "Chipmunks, squirrels, everybody busy with preparations. Could be a tough winter up here this year."

We skirt an arroyo beneath a timber-clad ridge for a mile or so before Jesse pulls up his horse in the shade, gets off, and says, "We're here. Tie your horse over there."

I'd put a hundred-dollar bill on Jesse knowing this country as well as anyone alive. Like his father, who took his last breaths in the Valle, and his grandfather, who also died up here, Jesse has covered a lot of the area while cowboying for various ranchers and landowners who have had stakes—and cattle—in the area. Fifteen years ago, he was riding through this same forest when his horse snagged its foot on an old, rusty strand of barbed wire. The horse stepped out of the wire uninjured, and Jesse began to look around, curious as to why a wire fence would be out here in the middle of nothing he could see.

Kicking aside the underbrush, he uncovered a shallow mound about six feet long, cobbled with pieces of



Jesse Martinez, a third-generation Valle Vidal stalwart, points out landmarks to the south.

sandstone and ringed by small pitchwood crosses about five inches high, stuck in the ground along the apparent grave's perimeter. Flat rocks all around him turned out to be headstones, and Jesse found himself in the middle of a cemetery that had half-succumbed to the forest. That was interesting in its own right, but when he turned over a slab of pale sandstone about two feet square, Jesse read the name of his grandfather Lucas Cortez.

Jesse tells me this story as he points to his grandfather's headstone and the nearby grave where the crosses stood, all of which burned in a forest fire in 2002, he says. He walks to his horse and pulls out a can of Modelo Especial from his saddlebags.

"We always knew that my grandfather had died somewhere up here, but that's about all we knew," he says, leaning against a tree. He cracks the beer, takes a long sip off it, and smiles. "This is a nice place to be buried."

Six weeks before Jesse took me to his grandfather's gravesite, I left a note on the door of his camper trailer asking if he'd be willing to show me around the Valle for a few days. A week later, he called me on the phone. "Come the last week of September," he told me. "It's the prettiest place on earth that week."

As directed, I roll into Jesse's camp in McCrystal Campground an hour before sundown to find his wife, JoAnn, laying out a first-rate New Mexican dinner: pinto beans that have been cooking for half a day, thin and sizzling carne asada, extra-hot green chile, squash and zucchini cooked on a disco over the fire, pico de gallo on the side, and soft, warm flour tortillas wrapped in cloth.

As we tuck into dinner by the light of a Coleman lantern, Jesse starts in on the wild character of the Valle. This country has some dark corners, he says, and over the years some strange people have come through it. A Vietnam veteran came a little unhinged after the war and decamped to the Valle to be rid of society. Wild, cagey people drift up into the area from Colorado's San Luis Valley, to the northwest. Several years ago, Jesse spent a winter living alone in a cabin near Costilla Reservoir, at the north end of the Valle. One morning he awoke to find large boot tracks in the snow circling his house.

"Whoever it was, they came down from the direction of the pass, walked all around my house, and back up toward the pass," he says, faintly shaking his head. "This was in the middle of the night in the middle of winter. They were big boots, like snowpacks. I have no idea who it could have been."

Hang around the Valle long enough and you're sure to hear stories. The country is full of legends and lore. Several cemeteries, each with its phantasmal trap-



This page, clockwise from top left: Blue skies of September. Mapping the day's ride. Taking an old logging trail. Facing page, clockwise from top left: A sturdy mountain horse. One of the old cemetery markers. Martinez shows his skill at finding shed antlers.

pings, keep testament to loggers, miners, cowboys, women, and early settlers. Locals who have been around for more than a few years, like Ezequiel Rael, a rangeland specialist for Carson National Forest, nod in agreement: The Valle produces some strange tales.

"I've talked to folks who've seen things, like lights, or heard noises out there, but you know how these kinds of stories go—they get repeated over and over, and by the end you don't really know what the truth is," says Rael. "I grew up here in Questa, so I've been hearing this stuff my whole life."

Jesse, too, has been hearing the stories his whole life. Jesse's dad once told him that when he was 13, in 1923, he and a friend were poking around an old graveyard when they broke a piece of glass from a nameplate on a grave. They suddenly heard a woman screaming. Their horses "went ballistic," Jesse says, and it was all the men could do to climb in their saddles and hang on as the horses took off at a run.

"After that," Jesse says, "my dad never went back to that cemetery."

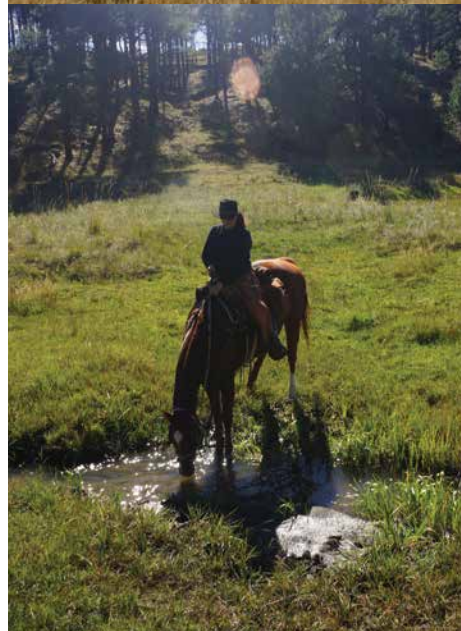
Valle Vidal opened to the public in 1982, when the Pennzoil Corporation donated it to the public domain. Pennzoil never developed any of the energy resources in the area, and the most lasting effect of the company's ownership is the high quality of roads in the area. In fact, the human footprint on the Valle has been minimal. While there have been some logging, grazing, and small-scale mining operations on the land over the years, none of the many owners ever scarred the land much beyond what the Jicarilla Apaches saw before they were run out of the area by the Comanches.

The first deed holders to the Valle were a pair of Mexicans named Carlos Beaubien and Guadalupe Miranda, who acquired their acreage under a government land grant in 1843, just as the United States was ramping up for war with Mexico. Miranda shortly thereafter fled home to old Mexico, and Beaubien sold his interest to his son-in-law, Lucien B. Maxwell.

By 1865, Maxwell, who'd been a frontier scout and trapper, had amassed 1.7 million acres in northern New Mexico and was encouraging Anglo settlers to the area. People slowly drifted in to graze their cattle and to cut timber for coal-mining operations near Ratón and elsewhere. A collection of small towns began to take shape, but in 1870, after Maxwell sold the land to an English syndicate, the Maxwell Land Grant and Railway Company, the settlers became squatters. The English company wanted the freeloading peasants removed from the area, and a conflict known as the Colfax County War broke out, which



Clockwise from left: Solitude reigns in the Valle. A late-afternoon lunch. Aspen groves hit peak color in late September. Jesse tells a story about the region. His wife, JoAnn, lets her horse drink from McCrystal Creek.



included Pat Garrett's killing of Billy the Kid at Lucien's Fort Sumner ranch.

The dispute over the settlers' right to the Valle, among other places, ended up before the Supreme Court in 1887. The court approved the English syndicate's clear title to the land, and the squatters mostly cleared out. The next flux of Anglos came in 1902 when a Chicago grain magnate, William Bartlett, bought 205,000 acres of the old grant with hopes of setting up a mountain retreat. And because the 19th-century settlers had pretty well killed all the elk in the area, Bartlett began reintroducing the animals, as well as Merriam turkeys and mule deer, to their historic range.

Bartlett died in 1918, and his widow sold the ranch to a consortium of investors led by *Los Angeles Times* publisher Harry Chandler in 1926. Chandler set up the Vermejo Park Club as a ranch and hunting

club. In 1930, he hired Elliott Barker to control predators, mostly mountain lions, in the area. Barker relentlessly canvassed the Valle for his quarry, and he later wrote a book about his adventures called *When the Dogs Bark "Treed,"* a reference to the unique baying of his hunting dogs when they had a lion in a tree.

"At Vermejo Park an unusual overpopulation of lions was steadily reducing deer population," he wrote. "My job was to harmonize lion numbers with the deer available for food."

Barker would become the state game warden for New Mexico the following year (a role that included writing reports for every issue of *New Mexico Magazine*). He was a bit of an old-school conservationist, actively hunting the animals that he loved so much. Today, a state-run wildlife management area abutting Valle Vidal on the south bears his name. His book stands among locals as an early account of animal patterns in the area. Jesse recommended it to me when I spoke to him a month before my visit to the Valle.

"A lot of what's in that book about how the elk move and where they find winter pasture is still true," he says. "Some of his stories might be a little exaggerated, but he did know what the animals were doing."

The Great Depression busted the Vermejo Park Club, and the next buyer was a Fort Worth businessman named W. J. Gourley. He refurbished many of the large buildings that stand today on Ted Turner's Vermejo Park Ranch, which Turner bought in 1996 and which abuts the Valle on the north and east. Gourley also wanted to bolster the game in the area, importing elk from Yellowstone National Park.

"Apparently, he paid \$3.50 a head and had them shipped down here on flatbed trucks," Jesse says. "To fit them on the trucks, they cut off the antlers above the first tine. I've heard you can still find those sawed-off antlers that were shed that first year."

Today, the Valle is home to about 2,500 elk, and during my visit the last week of September, they're in the middle of the breeding season, or rut, as it's called. All around my camp, the bugling of the males resonates symphonically through the forest. The herd seems dispersed in every direction from McCrystal Campground. When I wake in the night, the whistling continues.

Before dawn, I crawl out of my frosty tent to find the elk. The morning is quieter than the night before. I cut north from camp, slip through a barbed wire fence, and look over the wide meadows around McCrystal Creek. A mile distant, a lone bull makes his way into the open country. He tips his head back and lets out a whistle of steam in the morning air. From a knot of pine forest above the meadow, another bull sounds off with a challenge. As the first bull comes out of the long shadows, his tan coat lights up in the low-angle sun.

Overhead, a few thin scarves of cirrus clouds hang above the Valle like mares' tails in the blue sky. The quaking aspens seem to have paused in the perfectness of the day.

The Valle Vidal looms above corrals at the top of FR 1950.

"They say that the elk imported from Yellowstone were lighter-colored than the original elk," Jesse says. "The original elk—and people say that not all of them were shot—were darker."

The elk draw people to the Valle. In the early spring, before the area temporarily closes during May and June to let the elk calve in peace, hardy campers flood into the Valle to collect antlers shed by the bulls that same year. It's big business, Jesse says, and even with a foot of snow on the ground, the campground could have 40 horse trailers parked in it, all belonging to "shed hunters."

Traditional hunters looking for meat show up in the fall for a very limited season. New Mexico Game and Fish issues only a handful of tags through a lottery system for what are called once-in-a-lifetime hunts. Before the hunters arrive, cattle ranchers, cowboys, and quite a few people looking to help with the cowboy work round up the roughly 850 cow-calf pairs that graze there in the summer. Genial camps of people from as far away as Oklahoma form on the periphery of the campgrounds.

The warm summer months draw fishermen, car campers, backpackers, and a lot of Boy Scouts. As many as 3,500 Scouts march up to the Valle in noisy troops from neighboring Philmont Scout Ranch. You can see—and hear—they coming from miles away, says Jesse.

"I think it's a rule that they have to tie their pots and pans on the outside of their packs," he says. "Might be to scare away bears or something."

On my last day in the Valle, Jesse and I park our horse trailers at the top of the pass, the road's high point, between Costilla and Ratón. From the set of corrals where we park, the Valle Vidal proper, the valley from which the Forest Service drew the region's name, is visible to the south. He points over the broad, grassy plain, in the direction of Angel Fire, and southwest toward Red River, which is just over the hill, he says.

"And I guess somewhere about there," Jesse says, pointing to a broad corner in the dirt road a few hundred yards beyond the corrals, "is where that guy went off the road in the snow and ended up dying."

In March 2016, a man looking for a shortcut to Cañon City, Colorado, followed his GPS to the top of the Valle. In March, the Valle is still very much in the throes of winter, and at the wide bend near the corrals, the man's car slid off the road and became stuck in the snow.

We circle the edge of a tall-grass meadow, crossing several streams for a few miles before swinging back toward the trucks. Near the corrals, Jesse leads along an old logging grade that winds between firs

and under golden aspen trees. Jesse stops his horse and crosses his arm on the pommel of his saddle. Hammered into the ground in the middle of the track is an iron cross about three feet tall, with the unfortunate driver's initials, CFM, cut into the metal.

We turn our horses for the trailers. Jesse says there's another grave down the road a bit. It marks a child, born in 1947, died 1948, named Cleo F. Hughes Jr.

"Ten or twelve years ago, I saw two people pushing a wheelbarrow full of rocks from the road," Jesse says. "The next year, the grave was there."

I'm beginning to think that around every corner in the Valle lies a gravesite. To be sure, there is a handful of cemeteries in the Valle, and clearly a lot of headstones scattered throughout the area. All such sites are protected, and the Forest Service wants to preserve them for their archaeological value.

"There are relatives of people buried in those cemeteries that still come to pay their respects and visit the graves," says Carrie Leven, an archaeologist for the Carson National Forest. "Jesse's grandfather's grave is an example of that. We don't want those places disturbed."

Jesse's father's grave, however, is not as hidden. Seventeen years ago, at the set of corrals where Jesse and I have parked our trailers, Jesse and his dad were finishing up a day in the saddle, leaning on the fence. Jesse walked to the truck to get something, "and that was the last time I saw my dad alive," he says. An elk antler and a white wooden cross mark the site where his father's heart stopped beating. And every year, on October 14, Jesse and a few friends and family members raise a beer in honor of Henry Martinez, talk about the good ol' days, and take in the long vistas over the Valley of Life.

We unsaddle our horses in the still autumn afternoon. Overhead, a few thin scarves of cirrus clouds hang above the Valle like mares' tails in the blue sky. Without a breath of wind, the dry grama grass stands motionless. The quaking aspens seem to have paused in the perfectness of the day. The Valle, it strikes me, is flush with the park-like qualities that have led to similar areas not only falling under tighter restrictions, but also attracting more people. The Valle, I think as I pull the sweaty blankets off my horse, is like a secret garden at the top of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains. I say as much to Jesse and his wife, and they both smile.

"We'd like to be buried up here," JoAnn says. "This place is really like a home to us." ■

Will Grant is a Santa Fe-based freelance writer who embraces any story that combines horses, land, and culture in the West.

More Ways to Get Wild

Vermejo Park Ranch, near the Valle Vidal, was created from 200,000 acres of the onetime Maxwell Land Grant. Learn more here: nmmag.us/HighCountryValhalla

Valle Deep

The Carson National Forest oversees the Valle Vidal's hiking, bicycling, winter sports, horse riding, hunting, and camping options. (575) 786-0520; nmmag.us/FSVidal