Las Gorras Blancas

By

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On August 18, 1890, Felix Martinez, a northern New Mexico Chicano leader, was quoted in a local newspaper about the fight between Chicanos with Spanish land grants and the railroads, ranchers, and loggers: "On the one hand you have the power of money - the rich land grabbers - on the other you have the physical might of the people," Martinez told the New Mexico governor when he came to investigate violence in the area. The land around the town of Las Vegas was originally granted to all townspeople for farming and grazing. This grant was upheld by the United States in 1860, but after the Civil War, Anglo squatters, railroads, ranchers and loggers, continued to abuse the Chicanos' rights. Some Chicanos then organized Las Gorras Blancas (The White Caps), a group of nightriders who destroyed railroad tracks, cut fences, and otherwise harassed the intruders.

Fabiola Cabeza de Baca in the book "We Fed Them Cactus" explains that, "By cutting fences and burning barns the Raza sheepherders of New Mexico fought the advance of the cattlemen, as they had fought the invasion of the Texans in 1841 before the war against Mexico. In guerrilla warfare the villagers turned against the patrons. On the Llano Estacado the opponents organized into Los Caballeros de Labor (the Gentlemen of Labor) and the night-ridding Gorras Blancas in a bloody battle whose scars are still visible on the Raza body politic of the Southwest. The idyll of "the simple pastoral life had ended."
These two groups, and many others, destroy the myth that Hispanics passively allowed the land of New Mexico to fall into the hands of land developers without a fight.