Certainly you’ve heard of the Pedro Armendariz Grant (also spelled “Armendaris”), hugging the Rio Grande south of Socorro. It is the largest Spanish land grant in New Mexico, stretching through both Socorro and Sierra counties. Today, much of it remains as Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch. Who was Pedro Armendariz? Why was he awarded nearly a half-million acres? The well known Armendariz Grant has an interesting and somewhat confusing 200-year-old history.

Don Pedro Policarpo de Azcue y Armendariz
Pedro Armendariz was born about 1782 (family history states 1774) and served as a lieutenant in the Spanish royal army, serving at the garrisons of Chihuahua, San Elizario and Santa Fe. In 1810 he was adjutant to General Salcedo, military governor of Chihuahua. In this position, Armendariz worked with lieutenant Fecundo Melgares. They became friends – which played an important role in later years when awarding the Armendariz Grants.

In 1806, Melgares was sent to Santa Fe to patrol for unwanted visitors and trespassers into Spanish territory. And indeed, in 1807, Zebulon Pike and a handful of soldiers were apprehended in the San Luis Valley in Colorado. They were arrested for trespassing in New Spain and spying for the United States. They were sent to Chihuahua to determine their fate. Melgares was one of those who escorted Pike and his men to the governor at Chihuahua and engaged in the interrogation of the captured Americans.

Pike and his men were finally returned to the United States. In 1811, Pike published “A Map of the Internal Provinces of New Spain” – giving the U. S. government its first real look inside the secretive Spanish Empire of the southwest.

In the early 1800s, Mexican born Father Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, an ordained Catholic priest, used his pulpit to call for independence from Spain. Organizing an army to take Mexico City, he battled the Spanish army with some success. He was eventually defeated by the Spanish Army at Guadalajara. Father Hidalgo was captured and sent to Chihuahua. There he was defrocked and excommunicated from the Catholic church.

Hidalgo was also convicted of treason against the Spanish throne and sentenced to death by firing squad. On the morning of August 1, 1811, Hidalgo was led into the courtyard and executed. The firing squad was led by none other than lieutenant Pedro Armendariz. To the Mexicans, the “Father of the Revolution” was murdered by the Spaniards. To the Spaniards, including Armendariz, they had executed an insurgent Mexican.

In 1818, Armendariz’ friend Lt. Melgares was appointed as governor of the Northern Provinces of New Spain, and sent to the Palace of the Governors in Santa Fe. Armendariz accompanied his friend to Santa Fe. Governor Malgares appointed Armendariz to the post of tax collector. During this period, Armendariz bought some land at Valverde, meaning green valley, south of Socorro and built a small hacienda.

Pedro Armendariz Grant
In 1819, Armendariz applied to governor Melgares for a land grant for his property at Valverde. There were two types of Spanish land grants. The first was a community grant, such as the Socorro Land Grant; the second was a private grant, called a merced, usually awarded as a favor for political or military service. Armendariz applied for a merced, citing his military service and loyalty to the King of Spain.

The land grant requested by Armendariz turned out to be a huge parcel of land. Whether he was taking advantage of his friend, now governor of New Mexico, or Melgares’
unfamiliarity with the lower Rio Grande and Jornada del Muerto in Socorro County is not known. Recall that the lands along the Rio Grande south of Belen remained virtually abandoned throughout the 1700s. It was not until the very early 1800s that resettlement along this portion of the Rio Abajo, including Socorro, was authorized.

Armendariz Grant No. 33

It does appear Armendariz used some clever trickery in his land grant application. In an article on the Armendariz Land Grant, in the American Surveyor magazine, author Fred Roeder writes: “There follows a legal description designed to sound like he was asking the smallest of favors. With the greatest nonchalance – he describes little springs, little mountains, and little bends in the river which later surveyors found to be tens of miles apart.” No hint of the size of the grant is given in the application.

On December 4, 1819, Governor Facundo Melgares awarded the Fra Cristobal Land Grant to Pedro Armendariz, also known as the Armendariz Land Grant No. 33. It was later learned that it consisted of 397,235 acres along the east side of the Rio Grande.

Armendariz Grant No. 34

Armendariz must have thought, “That was easy.” Before the ink on the land grant dried, Armendariz applied for another little grant upon which to graze his small flock of sheep at Valverde. Just five months later, on May 3, 1820, the Valverde Grant was awarded to Armendariz. This parcel is known as Pedro Armendariz Grant number 34, on the west side of the Rio Grande, and consists of a mere 95,031 acres.

Armendariz was now one of the largest land owners in all of New Mexico. There is little evidence Santa Fe was aware of the extent of the Armendariz Grants. The acreages cited above, totaling nearly half a million acres, were not known until it was surveyed in 1872 by the Americans.
The official story is Pedro Armendariz built a combination home, ranch headquarters, hostel and stop for caravans along the Camino Real at Valverde. Built just north of Mesa del Contadero, or Black Mesa, Valverde was a luscious green valley ideal for grazing nearly year around. He tended herds of sheep and built acequias to irrigate fields filled with grape vines for making wine and aguardiente (brandy). Armendariz worked the land only for a few years when he abandoned it around 1824 because of Apache attacks. He returned to Chihuahua.

However, some researchers claim there is little to no documented evidence that Pedro Armendariz spent a single working day on the massive land grant. Instead, it appears the hacienda at Valverde was built and run by his son-in-law, Jose Rodrigo Garcia, the husband of Pedro Armendariz’ only daughter. It was he, and his wife, that likely fled around 1825 to Chihuahua, where Pedro had already returned several years earlier.

This was a period of time when the Spanish empire fell and jurisdiction of New Mexico went to Mexico City. New Spain was no more. It was now part of Mexico.

Starting in 1821, the arriving Mexican military and government officials were careful to rid the region of Spanish loyalists, for which Pedro Armendariz certainly was one. After all, he commanded the firing squad that executed Higaldo – the father of the revolution that gained Mexico’s independence from Spain. Was it really the Apaches that drove Armendariz and his son-in-law Garcia from the Rio Grande? Or, the newly established Mexican government?

Pedro Armendariz remained in Chihuahua the rest of his life where he served as magistrate of the State Supreme Court during the 1830s and 1840s.

**Territorial Era**

Mexican rule didn’t last very long, only from 1821 through 1846, the year that General Kearney marched into Santa Fe and declared it a territory of the United States. Under the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, the territorial government must respect Mexican land ownership and the Mexican Land Grants. Of course, Mexico seemed to have lost most of the land documents, leaving a huge surveying task for the Americans.

One of those early surveyors was Lieutenant William Emory. Traveling down the Rio Grande and El Camino Real on a cursory survey trip, he noted the “ruins at Valverde,” evidence that the Armendariz hacienda had been abandoned for some time by 1846.

In 1849, Pedro Armendariz deeded to attorney Hugh N. Smith and Santa Fe trader Thomas Biggs 4,000 acres “opposite the ruins of Valverde,” covering the present town site of San Marcial. This was done as payment for legal services rendered to Armendariz by Smith and unknown services rendered by Biggs.

Fort Conrad

Shortly after the American occupation of New Mexico, Fort Conrad was built across the Rio Grande from Valverde in 1851. At this same time farmer Pascual Joyla moved his family to the east side of the river across from Fort Conrad. Joyla cut and sold firewood to the military post. Shortly thereafter, a few other families settled in and around Joyla at his Valverde location and called the small farming village La Mesa de San Marcial. Of course, this was private land of the Armendariz Grant, but there is no documentation showing that Pedro Armendariz objected, provided he was even aware of the squatters.

Pedro Armendariz died in Chihuahua on May 3, 1853. Son-in-law Garcia showed up and presented himself as the legal heir to the 492,000 acres of the Armendariz Grant. He also pointing out that Fort Conrad was built on private property – namely his. The Americans were truly trying to respect Spanish law as spelled out in the Treaty of Higaldo, stating the oldest son inherits his father’s land, then the next oldest son, and so forth. The daughter is at the very bottom of the list, never mind the daughter’s husband. Garcia’s claim as the legal heir to the Armendariz Grant generated legal disputes for years.

Then, another son, Manuel Armendariz, not the eldest, appeared with a power of attorney from now deceased Pedro Armendariz, claiming title to the land grant. This generated further legal and court action deciding if the Mexican power of attorney was legitimate or if the original deed was properly recorded.

Due to the land ownership dispute, and for a variety of other reasons, the Army abandoned Fort Conrad in March 1854.

Fort Craig

Fort Craig was built in 1854 about seven miles to the south of now abandoned Fort Conrad. It was discovered that Fort
Fort Craig was built in 1854 to protect travelers along El Camino Real. It was later discovered it had been built on the private property of the Armendariz Grant. This cost the U.S. Army $2,000 a year in gold for rent.

Craig was also built on the private land of the Armendariz Grant, launching another round of legal disputes. To further complicate matters, the Department of New Mexico had given members of the Colorado Volunteers parcels of land in 1862 as compensation for their service during the Civil War Battle of Valverde. Add lawyers from Santa Fe trying to take advantage of the confusion to obtain the land for themselves, a very complex ownership question of the Pedro Armendariz Grant persisted for years.

In 1864, the first lease payment of $2,000 in gold per year for Fort Craig was paid to Manuel Armendariz, finally determined to be the legal heir of the Pedro Armendaris Grant.

On Dec. 6, 1858, Col. Robert Stapleton bought Smith's share of the 4,000 acre parcel, lying along the west bank of the Rio Grande, and included a part of the Fort Craig reservation.

A flood down the Rio Grande in 1866 sent rushing waters into Black Mesa. The flood waters destroyed all of Valverde and La Mesa de San Marcial. The people wasted no time in relocating their village to the higher ground on the west side of the Rio Grande, inadvertently settling on Col. Stapleton’s land. They renamed their new village to simply San Marcial. For years, Stapleton attempted to collect lease from the San Marcial residents to no avail. The entire growing town of San Marcial were basically illegal squatters.

The First Survey

In 1872, the U. S. Army surveyed the Pedro Armendariz Grants based on the original Spanish application description. This was the first time it was realized that Pedro Armendariz No. 33 and No. 34 consisted of nearly a half-million acres. It extended from north of San Marcial to south of present day Engle.

The surveyors at the Government Land Office were astonished at it’s massive size for a private land grant. In spite of this, the United States issued a patent for the grant in 1878 – as it was legally a Spanish land grant.

While the patent was in progress, the San Marcial & Improvement Co. was formed and purchased Stapleton's portion of the land. Challenging the parcel in court, the Territory of New Mexico determined the San Marcial & Improvement Company to be the legal owner of the 4,000 acre tract of land once owned by Stapleton and Biggs. This quieted all titles in the town site of San Marcial.

The railroad arrived along the Rio Grande in 1881. While surveying around San Marcial, they noted the villages of San Marcial and Geronimo consisted of “about 100 adobe dwellings with a population of about 400 persons.” The 4,000 acre tract was now owned by Wilson Waddingham, who was eager to do business with the railroad. He sold some land about a mile north of San Marcial to the railroad for constructing their yards, round table, terminal facilities and the Harvey House restaurant. This new railroad town, called “New Town” San Marcial, quickly boomed, bringing in hundreds of railroad workers.
John Warren was the Diamond A Ranch manager of the Armendariz holdings. He located and built the ranch headquarters at Engle to be near the railroad for shipping cattle. Upon the death of Warren in 1916, his son, George, became ranch manager.

In the book, History of New Mexico, author George Anderson wrote (in 1907): "The Victorio Land and Cattle Company, of which H. A. Jastro of Bakersfield, California is president, and which has its main office in Deming, is the greatest corporation operated in cattle in the southwest. The range covers most of the country from Silver City south into old Mexico, and includes many different ranches. They ship about 20,000 head of cattle per year, though the number of head on the open ranges can only be estimated.”

In 1909, final plans for Elephant Butte Dam and Reservoir were underway. The Bureau of Reclamation offered the Victorio Land and Cattle Company $65,000 for the 34,000 acres of Diamond A land condemned to be flooded by the reservoir, or about $2 per acre. The company wanted $600,000. After a series of court battles, the government was ordered to pay $200,000 for the property, less than $6 per acre. The construction of the dam was delayed over a year as these negotiations took place.

Construction on the dam began in 1913. This drove many people living in the villages along the Rio Grande to move. Many relocated to the San Marcial area.

When the dam was completed in 1919, the Diamond A Ranch complained that some of these families were settling on their land, not that set aside for the San Marcial town site. As San Marcial grew, it extended into private lands of the Diamond A Ranch. They attempted to collect rents and leases from these people to no avail, finally bringing a class action suit against these families and the town of San Marcial.

The dispute was finally settled in 1929 – not by the courts, but by the Rio Grande. A major flood down the river completely inundated San Marcial. There was no town or people left. The dried mud and feet of silt was gladly given back to the Diamond A Ranch.

Oppenheimer Corporation
Cattle operations on the Diamond A declined after World War II. Much of the Armendaris Ranch, particularly the ranch land through the Jornada del Muerto, went unused. The Diamond A leased the huge ranch to the Oppenheimer Corporation in 1963. A few years later, the Armendaris Group, spelled with an “s,” a subsidiary of the Oppenheimer Corporation, purchased the Pedro Armendariz Grant.

Oppenheimer Industries was the country’s largest cattle management firm. In a 1968 Time magazine article, it was estimated the company had “220,000 head of cattle on more than 100 ranches in 17 states.” One of these ranches was the 380,000 acre Armendaris Ranch.
In 1971, a lawsuit was filed by the Fort Sill and Chiricahua Apache tribes against the United States government. The suit attempted to reclaim over one million acres of land taken from the Apaches in September 1886 upon the surrender of Geronimo. The government hired land expert Donald Myers to investigate the land holdings under dispute and determine 1886 values. One of the first tracts investigated was the Pedro Armendariz Grants, number 33 and 34.

Myers surveyed the grant, verifying it consisted of 443,035 acres and assigned an 1887 value of $150,000. He also estimated that by 1912 statehood, the value of the land had doubled to about $300,000 due to improvements made by the Diamond A Ranch. That would be about $6.5 million in today's money.

In 1990, the Armendariz Group filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy with listed assets of about $16 million and liabilities of about $12 million. Those assets consist primarily of the 380,000 acre cattle ranch in New Mexico.

The Wespac Investment trust purchased a 51 per cent stake in the Armendaris Ranch with plans to develop the land along the east side of Elephant Butte, just north of the dam, into a community with schools and shopping centers. Furthermore, they wanted to develop some of the land east of Truth or Consequences into agricultural land. They were hoping proceeds from these developments would prevent bankruptcy of the Armendaris Ranch group.

However, they were unable to obtain proper water rights for these projects. The State of New Mexico would not allow water from Elephant Butte to be used, or to drill and pump the water needed from the already water starved Jornada del Muerto basin.

Once in Bankruptcy court, Wespac Investments and Oppenheimer Corporation proposed to subdivide the property into individual tracts of land for homes near Truth or Consequences or small ranches. The proceeds would be sufficient to pay off their creditors. This plan was denied based on whether or not the land grant could be cut up into smaller pieces. The case was bound over to federal court.

After considerable litigation, the federal court ruled that the main Pedro Armendariz Grant No. 33 could not be partitioned into smaller pieces – the grant had to legally remain intact per the 1846 Treaty of Higaldo. The other parcel, Armendariz Grant No. 34, was allowed to be sold in sections since individual parcels had been sold over the years, such as to the settlers of San Marcial and the railroad, setting a precedence.

This forced the bankruptcy of the Oppenheimer Corporation and the Armendaris Ranch. The federal court became the receiver of the Armendariz Grants and put it up for sale. The problem, of course, is who would purchase a single 388,000 acre abandoned ranch on desert land?

Ted Turner Properties

In February 1994, Ted Turner purchased the Armendariz for a reported $14 million. Turner purchased all of Pedro Armendariz Grant No. 33, the original Fra Cristobal grant on the east side of the river, and portions of Pedro Armendariz Grant No. 34, the Valverde Grant, including land in and around the San Marcial town site.

Other portions of Pedro Armendariz No. 34 were purchased by the Willow Springs Ranch Property Owners Association. They, in turn, subdivided it into smaller parcels, for which a few have been developed into small ranches and rural homes. This also includes the Highland Springs subdivision. This parcel is located west of Interstate 25 near San Marcial, and between the Chupadera and Magdalena mountains.

Ted Turner decided to keep the historic name – the Armendaris Ranch, spelled with an “s.” According to the Ted Turner Enterprises website, the ranch is 358,643-acres, or about 2/3rds of the original 492,266 acre Armendariz grant. This keeps the grant largely intact as required by law.

Ted Turner's Armendaris Ranch runs from the southern boundary of the Bosque del Apache National Wildlife Refuge, including the historic town sites of Tiffany, Valverde and La Mesa, south to Engle. The southwest corner
of the ranch is within one mile of Truth or Consequences. At the widest point, it is 23 miles east to west, including land on the west side of I-25. The eastern boundary largely joins with the White Sands Missile Proving Grounds. Fifty-three miles of the Rio Grande flows through the Armendaris Ranch.

Ted Turner owns five major ranches in New Mexico and Montana, totalling about 2 million acres, making him the largest individual land owner in the country. His ranches are well known for their buffalo herds, now exceeding 50,000 head. About 1,500 bison are located on the Armendaris.

Ted Turner has proven to be an excellent steward of this historic land. He has expended great resources and effort restoring the neglected grant into a working ranch while protecting the environment and the many historical and cultural sites. This includes the historic Camino Real trail through the Jornada del Muerto, several historic town sites, such as Paraje Fra Cristobal, and even a Confederate campsite used during the Civil War Battle at Valverde.

A lesser known significant site on the Armendaris is the Jornada bat caves. With a population of about three million Mexican free tail bats, it is considered one of North America's best virgin bat caves. The bats live in the lava tubes formed by the Jornada lava flow on the eastern stretches of the grant.

The only known exploitation of the bats were several years around 1898. Guano was mined and shipped to Hawaii to develop the pineapple fields on Oahu. Otherwise, the extensive bat colony has been exposed to very little human intervention, and the Armendaris Ranch keeps it that way.

Today's Armendaris is also working hard at reintroducing the desert big horn sheep, the Bolson tortoise, and other species. Populations of mule deer, onyx, cougar and ground hogs are also increasing due to their conservation measures, returning the Armendaris to its original habitat. As a result of these conservation successes, the huge Armendaris Ranch has become a wildlife laboratory of sorts used by many researchers.

Ted Turner has also built a beautiful desert home on the Armendaris, tucked into the foothills on the east side of the Fra Cristobal Mountains. Turner lives full time on his Montana Ranch, though does live in his Armendaris Ranch home when he visits the ranch. He has certainly spent more time on the grant than Pedro Armendariz did!

The Pedro Armendariz Grant remains one of Socorro County's historic lands. Under Ted Turner's ownership, and that of ranch manager Tom Wadell and employees, it appears this huge parcel of Socorro and Sierra Counties is in very good hands.

Some of the references used in this article:
“History of New Mexico” by George B. Anderson; “Leading Facts of New Mexican History” by Ralph Emerson Twitchell; Indian Claims Commission; “The Armendaris Grant” by Fred Roeder, American Surveyor magazine; “Tales from the Journey of the Dead” by Alan Boyle; Socorro County Assessor's Office records and maps; New Mexico Office of the State Historian, and field work by the author.
Update:

After the publication of this article in May 2008, I received an email from Raul Armendariz (Raul Luiz Azcue y Armendariz), a descendent of Don Pedro Armendariz, who graciously provided me with the following excerpts from the Armendariz family history, which has been exhaustively researched back to the 4th Century, A.D.

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(generacion 20, hijo de Francisco y Maria)

**capitan Don Carlos Jose de Azcue y Armendraiz Duran**

capitan de Dragones provincia San Carlos, nac. 1720 en San Bartolome.

Sus haciendas: Santa Catalina de Corrales (S.B.), San Antonio de Zapata (1790);

esposa: Anna Antonia de Cordero Molinar, mat. 1747 San Bartolome

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(generacion 21, hijo de Carlos y Anna)

**comandante Don Pedro Joseph Manuel de Azcue y Armendariz Cordero**

cap. de Dragones, Provincia San Carlos, Parral; commandante de Dragones, Provincia San Carlos, Parral; Subdelegado del Real Hacienda, Durango; sus haciendas: San Antonio de Zapata, vivian en Santa Catharina de Corrales (1807), y tenia otros negocios en las haciendas: San Buenaventura (pueblo Atonotilco), Nuestra Senora del Asuncion (Rio Florida).

Nacio en 1748, San Bartolome; bautisado en pueblo Atonotilco; esposa: Maria Rita de Azcue y Armendariz, nat. de San Bart., bautisada en el pueblo de Atonotilco. Dos de sus hijos, Jose y Pedro, eran presbiteros en San Bart. y Parral desde 1787.

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(generacion 22, hijo de Pedro Joseph y Maria Rita)

**capitan Don Pedro Policarpio de Azcue y Armendariz Azcue y Armendariz**

alferez 2 compania de volante de Nueva Vizcaya, y del presidio de la Namiquipa (~1808), teniente del presidio de Janos, Chihuahua (1809), teniente del presidio de Santa Fe, Nueva Mexico (1809) nombrado por el Gobernador de la Nueva Vizcaya Salcedo y Salcedo. Testigo a los muertes del Cura Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, Ignacio Allende, Aldama, Jimenez, y Santamaria (1811).

Recibio por el Rey de Espana en 1821 tierras en Nueva Mexico (Land Grant #33 y #34). Alcalde de Santa Fe, NM.

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Nacio Dic. 1774 en hacienda del Rosario, San Bartolome; baut. en mision del pueblo de Atonotilco (San Bart.); documento los ultimos dias de las vidas de los leaders de la Independencia (v. Muerte de los Senores Generales Cura Don Miguel Hidalgo y Costilla, Don Ignacio Allende, ... , por Pedro Armendariz, Puebla, 1822; v. Ultimos Instantes de los Primeros Caudillos de la Independencia, Narracion de un Testigo Ocular, Reimprenta, Luis Gonzalez Obregon, Mexico 1896). Caso en 1808 Santa Fe, N.M. con Maria Josefa Ortiz y Bustamante y Garcia de Noriega (de 15 anos), hija del tabacero Don Francisco Ortiz y Bustamante (hermano del Alcalde), y Maria del Carmen Garcia de Noriega; por P.P. era nieta del cap. Antonio Joseph Ortiz, y Rosa Bustamante, y bis nieta de Nicolas Ortiz y Gertrudis Paes Hurtado (hija del reconquistador de Nueba Mexico Juan Paes Hurtado), y tambien bis nieta de cap. Bernardo Bustamante y Feliciiana Laso de la Vega. Por P.M. era nieta de cap. Joseph Garcia de Noriega y Rosalia Velarde, y bis nieta de Lazaro Garcia de Noriega y Barbara N. Ladrón de Guebara, y tambien de Manuel Velarde y Cosio y Lugarda Lucero de Godoy (v. expediente matrimonial de Don Pedro de Azcue y Armendariz, Archivo Militar de Segovia). En 1821 Pedro recibio del Rey de Espana dos terenos en Nueva Mexico (Land Grants #33 y #34) que miden ~140 milas de largo y 40 millas de ancho, extienden desde Socorro a Las Cruces; en 1903 estas tierras vendieron al Kern County Land & Cattle Co. (despues nombrado Teneco West Co.) y en 1999 al magnato Senor Ted Turner. Su expediente personal esta en Valladolid.

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(generacion 23, hijos de Pedro Policarpio y Maria Josepha)

1) **Jose Manuel Azcue y Armendariz de Ortiz y Bustamante** (n. 1819)

2) **Enrique Francisco de Paula Azcue y Armendariz de Ortiz y Bustamante** (n. 1822)

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Signature of Pedro Armendariz on an 1809 document

Spanish Coat of Arms for the Armendariz family