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## Taos Pueblo Celebrates Return of Blue Lake

[By Andy Stiny](#)

*For the Journal*

TAOS — Some had never heard of Blue Lake until Saturday.

But those who live at Taos Pueblo remember years of fighting by their ancestors to get the sacred lake back into Indian hands.

Both groups came together Saturday under a blue sky with puffy clouds beside Taos Mountain, to share food and celebrate the 40th anniversary of the return of Blue Lake.

In 1906 President Teddy Roosevelt appropriated, without asking, 48,000 acres of pueblo property including Blue Lake and the lands surrounding it. The land became part of the country's national forests. The 64-year fight over the land lasted until 1970, when President Richard Nixon signed the bill that made the lake and the surrounding acreage Indian country once again.

Before a crowd of hundreds, the ceremonial cane of office that Nixon gave the pueblo that day was hoisted high for all to see.

The anniversary celebrations started at 8 a.m. with a traditional call from Gov. James Lujan Sr. kicking off a day of speeches, dances and a traditional feast at the home Tony Reyna, alongside the Rio Pueblo.

David and Mary Chase of Cleveland had never heard of Blue Lake until a few days ago when they flew into Albuquerque.

"I am glad there are some parts of the country that are returned to Native Americans," said David Chase. "We took so much from them."

Mary Chase was overwhelmed by the scene. "It's beautiful. My heart has always been with the American Indian," she said.

Tribal Council member Cesario Lujan and his wife, Josephine, waited in line in the hot sun to get into one home, where snacks and cold drinks were offered. "This day means a lot," said Cesario Lujan. "Not only we got Blue Lake back but

our elders never quit (fighting), and we are still fighting — because every time you turn around someone wants a piece of our land."

Josephine Lujan, in her 70s, was grateful the lake was returned "because that's what we call 'the walk' and ask for our needs. We will always have the strength to walk to Blue Lake, the beautiful Blue Lake."

Josephine Lujan says she goes to Blue Lake every year but now goes on horseback. "We go up there and worship," she said.

Sylvia Mirabal, who also goes yearly to the lake, was only 8 years old in 1970, too young to understand the importance of the law signed that day. "We are able to still get to Blue Lake freely, and that's the most significant thing," she said. "My grandfathers made this happen."

At 2 p.m., Gov. Lujan, perched on the second-highest level of the 900-plus-year-old main Taos Pueblo, repeated the Tiwa cadence of the traditional call.

Geronimo Lujan, who will turn 100 next week, walked with his daughter Eileen for the afternoon ceremony as hundreds of visitors drifted from the feast back to where a stage was set up for the keynote speech by Larry Echo Hawk, assistant secretary for Indian Affairs in the Department of Interior.

"I bring you greetings from the president of the United States, Barack Obama," Echo Hawk began to applause from the audience. "It really was a significant and historic occurrence," he said of the 1970 legislation.

On Friday, Obama "formally approved a letter of support for the Taos water settlement," said Echo Hawk, referring to a long-standing water rights lawsuit involving both the pueblo and non-Indians in the Taos area. The crowd applauded again, and Echo Hawk said the Obama administration was negotiating on legislation to settle those claims.

But Blue Lake's historic return was larger than the event itself, Echo Hawk said. "The Blue Lake restoration signaled a new era of Indian policy."

Since, Echo Hawk, who is Pawnee, said Native people prayed during past dark moments. "They prayed for a better day. Those prayers were answered — they were answered in 1970."

