

November 19, 2012 – NativeTimes.com - [Fort Sill Apache place sign, make public commitment to return to N.M. homeland](#)

S.E. RUCKMAN, Native Times Special Contributor

DEMING, N.M. – The sign is right out there for all to see. Tagged by matching cross motifs, the Fort Sill Apache's reservation marker proclaims who owns these 30 acres. Although traffic is not heavy here, the sign serves a purpose; to announce the arrival, or re-arrival, of the Fort Sill Apache to their former territory.

To cue the occasion, Fort Sill Apache tribal members and leaders alike gathered Nov. 16 to celebrate the one-year anniversary of the tribe's reservation designation granted by the U.S. Dept. of Interior. Attendees also watched Apache ceremonial dancing and singing while hearing an update on their return-to-New-Mexico plans.

A year ago, the Fort Sill Apache reservation declaration barely fit a one-page notice in the Federal Register, but to the tribe the official public designation was huge. It symbolized getting their own back, officials said. They decided to put up a literal sign to reflect the solid commitment to return to New Mexico, said Jeff Haozous, Apache chairman.

“Without the sign, people could think that it is just a restaurant and smokeshop because that's all that is there now, but it's much more than that to us,” Haozous said. “It is the first step in the repatriation of our tribe to its rightful home.”

A lot of thought went into what to put on the sign, officials said. Adding on “Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache,” reflects a shift in their identity from Fort Sill Apache back to their original name. The 697-member tribe is the successor to the Chiricahua Warm Springs Apache bands, who were removed to Oklahoma after Geronimo's capture in the 1880s.

An unconditional claim to their former reservation area has been elusive for the Apache band. After buying the land, a Fort Sill Apache smokeshop/restaurant was shifted into a Class II casino that was shut down in 2009 by then New Mexico governor, Bill Richardson, who said the land was not eligible for gaming. The tribe is seeking a two-part determination on the matter from the U.S. Department of Interior, officials said.

Their reservation anniversary ceremony also unveiled a new flag without the words Fort Sill and with the words, Chiricahua/Warm Springs. An official tribal name change is also in the works.

The steps they are taking to regain their place in their original territory don't mean every tribal member is all in for going west (their smokeshop/restaurant is named Apache Homelands). Tribal business committee member, Loretta Buckner, said she sees the tribe's affiliation with New Mexico as historical but has divided loyalties.

“When we were set free in all those years ago, some of us chose to stay,” she said. “Oklahoma is home. I was born here. My mother was born in 1913. She was the last allottee and the youngest prisoner of war.”

Over the course of a century (the Apache band celebrates the centennial of their release in 2013) the tribe arrived by train in Fort Sill from St. Augustine, Florida to be prisoners of war and later received land allotments in the early 1900s. They eventually established a land claim that paved the way for them to open a small but profitable gaming site in Lawton, Okla.

After opening a hotel at their Lawton casino in August, the tribe has turned its full attention and efforts toward New Mexico. They continue lobbying support for a Deming casino among various New Mexico politicians, a mix of pro and anti Fort Sill Apache/Chiricahua Warm Springs interests.

New Mexico’s governor, Susana Martinez continues to oppose the Apaches casino plans although the tribe hopes to find a booster for their cause in newly elected New Mexico Sen. Martin Heinrich, who replaced Sen. Jeff Bingaman, a staunch opponent to their plans. Sen. Heinrich was unavailable for comment, according to his representative, Whitney Potter.

Local Luna County Manager Kelly Kuentzler, said while she can’t advocate for other entities, they regard the Fort Sill Apaches favorably.

“Luna County supports economic development in the Akela area,” she said.

For them to return a measure would have to be OK’d by the tribe’s general counsel (voting tribal members) before it could be realized. In the meantime, the tribe is doing what it can to reacquaint itself with their former territory while pushing for a way to make it happen.

“The problem with returning to the land is that we have no way to finance it,” Haozous said. “That’s why we are seeking to open a casino here, to provide opportunities for our members to move to the homeland with a job...”



A sign proclaims 30 acres in New Mexico as home of the Chiricahua/Warm Springs Apache. The sign was placed by the Fort Sill Apache Tribe Nov. 16 to mark the one-year anniversary of their official reservation designation.