AYER Y HOY en TAOS

Yesterday and Today in Taos County and Northern New Mexico

Winter 2025 Issue #59

AN ELECTRIC COOP CHANGED TAOS

by Michael Miller

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A publication of the Taos County Historical Society

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Taos County Historical Society's publication, Ayer y Hoy en Taos - Taos County and Northern New Mexico, is published semi-annually by the Historical Society.

We invite articles of a scholarly nature, as well as book reviews of recent publications pertinent to the Taos and northern New Mexico area. We are open to publishing occasional reminiscences, folklore, oral history and poetry that are of historical interest.

The Taos County Historical Society endeavors to maintain high standards of quality in AYER Y HOY, and we seek to make improvements as we go along. Readers' comments and suggestions are welcome.

AYER Y HOY is distributed to all members of the Taos County Historical Society as a benefit of membership.

Editor
Dave Cordova

The Taos County Historical Society is a New Mexico non-profit organization dedicated to the study and preservation of the historical resources of Taos County and Northern New Mexico. Membership is open to any interested person, regardless of residence.

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A Message from the TCHS President Ernestina Cordova

Spring Reflections and A Look Ahead

As we come to the close of another year, we take this opportunity to reflect on the remarkable lecture series we have enjoyed together throughout 2025. Each of our speakers offered engaging stories and invaluable insights into our shared history and culture. The traditions and legacies that define us are a vital part of our identity, a way of life that must be preserved and celebrated. The vision and dedication of those who presented this year continue to strengthen our organization and will long be remembered.

Our June presenter was Tim Green, who introduced us to Isaac Slover and the Estranjeros en Taos. We sponsored a field trip to the "Pit House at Pot Creek" led by John Ubelaker. "The Early History of Taos Ski Valley" was the subject of the August lecture presented by Mickey Blake. The Taos County Extension Agent, Will Jaremco, presented a timely program about "La Cosecha". The October lecture was a very entertaining spotlight on the area's "Bilingual Storytelling" by Paulette Atencio. In November Vito Trujillo, Jr. presented a program of The Music of Northern New Mexico. And the 2025 Lecture series culminates during our Annual Christmas Luncheon, with guest speaker Francisco "El Comanche" Gonzales, speaking on "Los Comanches de la Serna."

We are also very pleased with the progress on the renovation of the Old Courthouse. We anticipate being able to occupy the top floor, dedicating it to museum and archival spaces that will be accessible to our friends, neighbors, and visitors. This project represents history in the making, and we hope for the continued support of our community in these efforts.

Our mission remains steadfast: to preserve the irreplaceable. We make this commitment today we ensure that future generations will be able to learn from and enjoy our shared heritage.

**In the spirit of the season,
we extend our warmest wishes for a
*"Feliz Navidad y Próspero Año Nuevo."***

With Warmest Regards,

Ernestina Cordova, President
Taos County Historical Society

"AN ELECTRIC CO-OP CHANGED TAOS"

by Michael Miller (Copyright 1985)

It has been said, for centuries some say, that Taos is not a town, a village, or a place. Instead, they say, Taos is a state of mind, a unique way of life unequaled anywhere in the world. People from all walks of life, from all parts of the world, have visited Taos. Well-known by tourists and visitors as a haven for the arts and a "Shangri-la" for those weary of the routines of modern living this small northern New Mexico town has seen many faces pass through its streets.

For New Mexicans and visitors alike, it is a place of rugged beauty, possessing majestic mountain ranges, traditional New Mexico culture, and vast expanses of open land surrounding the city as far as the eye can see. It is also an ancient place home of the nearby Pueblo of Taos, the most isolated and independent of the Rio Grande pueblos. Later it became a Spanish settlement, Fernando de Taos, founded in 1617 and since then life in Taos has never been the same.

Taos Plaza c. 1935

Palace of the Governors Photo Archives

Each passing century brought new people, with new ideas, from different places and Taos grew, emerging slowly into the twentieth century. Throughout its history Taos has always been a pleasant, but at the same time difficult place to live.

Climate, isolation, and deep-rooted tradition brought modern day changes at a slow pace. Fortunately, for Taos and New Mexico the advantages of civilization have touched the edges of the town enough to make living a little more comfortable physically, but not enough to change the traditional lifestyle of the community. In Taos, "tradition rules and hard work reigns."

One of the advantages of progress that made life more pleasant and brought about substantial change to Taos was the introduction of electricity. Like most things in Taos, it came slowly with great effort and hard work on the part of the people of the town. But once it arrived it gave them more free time, time to relax and step back from the drudgery and difficulty of routine chores and time to pursue other interests. Interests related to creativity.

Many old-timers in Taos remember the days before the arrival of electricity and their recollections provide a valuable contribution to the town's history and help us to understand what life was really like before the electric light.

Thomas Tarleton, for example, recalls that Taos prior to the 1920s was a predominantly Spanish speaking community. Indians, Hispanics, and Americanos alike carried on their daily affairs in Spanish. Tarleton calls it, "the universal language and everyone in town spoke it."

The economy, at that time, was based upon barter and agriculture and the main products of exchange were sheep and wool. Marcelino Martinez, a Questa rancher, merchant, and civic leader, remembers that many people raised sheep, and he animatedly notes that, "unlike today, they could be grazed almost anywhere." Responsibility and active participation in the support of the family began at an early age. Juan Valdez recalls that he started his career as a sheep and goat herder at the age of sixteen. The work was hard and lonely, and luxuries were few at the end of a long day.

There were a few stores in Taos in the early days, and they sold only the essentials. Most merchants were forced to store their supplies for up to six months or more because isolation and rugged roads did not make travel to Taos easy. Often it was impossible to make it to Taos except on horseback and consequently, sacrifice and hardship was commonplace for the people who lived there.

Aniceto Cordova recollects, "that people then bought only those commodities that could not be harvested on the farm." Those products included such items as salt, sugar, coffee, and other luxuries. He further adds that, "although there was not much cash surplus in those days, family farms provided abundantly for those that worked them."

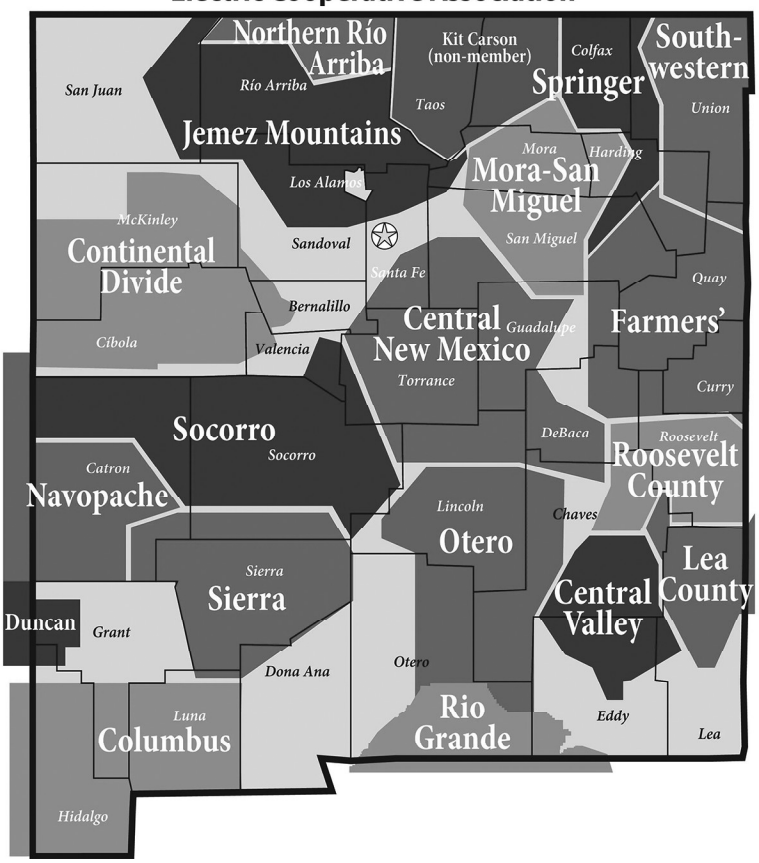
Food preservation and storage was a major and time-consuming activity before electricity. Every house had a "*dispensa*" for storage and ice was cut from ponds and rivers to preserve the family food supply. Cordova had a cold house to preserve his family's food-stocks. Each year, he recalls, "it was filled with fresh sawdust for insulation and in early spring we would cut ice and store it in the cold house." In this way his family's food supply was preserved all summer.

llumination at night was no simple matter. The chores of lighting the houses during the long winter nights were time consuming and inconvenient. Candles, kerosene lamps, and gas lights were the main sources of light. Frances Maestas remembers making candles for her household, "with lard and rags for wicks."

Staying close to home was a common practice in those days because of the difficulty of travel. A horse and buggy journey from Arroyo Seco to Taos, for example, was a day long affair. Even the arrival of automobiles did not solve the transportation problem substantially because of the poor maintenance of the roads. Thomas Tarleton recalls, "that automobiles could not get around because of the poor condition of the streets and roads and that most people traveled by horse and wagon for many years after the arrival of cars."

If someone wanted to travel to Raton, Santa Fe or Alamosa, Tarleton remembers that "they took the stagecoach or railroad." Taos artist, Oscar Berninghaus, was apparently one of the first to successfully attempt automobile travel to and from Taos in the early days.

Members of the New Mexico Rural Electric Cooperative Association



No one in town had refrigeration, hot water, appliances or any of the electrical conveniences that are so common today. Washing was done outside on washboards and ironing was a chore every woman hated because it required heating the heavy iron on a woodstove and literally pushing it across the clothes with back breaking strain. Days were spent preparing for night's light. Lamp chimneys had to be cleaned, wicks cut and trimmed, and kerosene fires were a constant worry.

Some citizens and affluent merchants began to experiment with electricity in these early years. Core plants were built in several locations which were run on engines during the time the lights were on. Others used the "Delco" which stored electricity in batteries. These "electrical plants", though noisy and often cantankerous made possible a new form of recreation for the people of Taos; the motion picture theatre.

For most people, however, these infrequent but entertaining contacts with electricity were unique rather than commonplace. After an evening at the movies or a day shopping in electrically powered stores the majority of the population returned home to the twinkle of kerosene lamps. In 1923, Juan Montoya was a young man living in the isolated valley of Valdez. Intrigued with technical magazine articles about electricity he was determined to produce this modern wonder in his own community. He bought a used water wheel from a defunct mining company in the area and began to experiment with simple electricity.

"Near my house was a hill with an acequia running down," he recalls. "There I set up my water wheel. I diverted the water to turn the wheel which was hooked up to several automobile generators that ran electricity to my house. Before long I was the only one in the valley with a very special form of entertainment: the radio. I was also able to store electricity in several batteries, and I ran the lights and the radio for several hours at a time. Neighbors from all over would come over to listen to the radio and enjoy this wonderful new invention."

Al Yaple, of Cerro, New Mexico, was a master carpenter by trade. He built a wind generator in Cerro for his electrical needs. He remembers that "kids would get off the bus after school and come over to his house to listen to 'Gangbusters' on the radio."

In 1926, William Quebedeaux, an out-of-town financier, was interested in building a power plant in Taos. It was not until 1928, however, that a permit was issued and several engines were installed to generate electricity.

Al Yaple was hired to oversee construction of the plant and supervise the installation of the engines. The first engine used was a three-cylinder model with cylinders measuring six-teen inches in diameter. Yaple recollects, "that it took twenty men two days to transport that engine from Ute Park in Colfax County to Taos, a distance of only forty-four miles."

Gaylord Burt was hired as manager of the plant, and it was his job to oversee the entire operation and solicit customers and business. The price was high in 1928, over twenty-five cents per kilowatt hour, and the customer had to pay for poles, lines, and wiring. In spite of this high cost fifty subscribers were easily found and before long demand outgrew capacity.

Quebedeaux operated the Taos Power Company for several years, but eventually he sold the plant to William A. Beahr Company of Chicago. In 1930, the records indicate a name change to New Mexico Public Service Company, which was not a predecessor of the present conglomerate PNM.

n advertisement appeared in the Laughing Horse, a local Taos periodical, in 1930 which publicized the services of the New Mexico Power Company. From all indications, the two company names represented the same power plant which was originally sold to William Beahr. The power company advertised construction, wiring, and appliance sales. Since there were no contractors, electricians, or suppliers in the area the company provided everything including materials, installation, and maintenance. Soon houses and buildings all over Taos were being wired for electricity.

At first the wiring was crude. A hole was drilled through the roof of the house, and a single wire was strung for a ceiling light. In some homes this procedure was repeated for all the rooms in the house. When the first rain came after installation, roofs leaked all over town, but by some miracle there was light.

On May 11, 1935, electricity in the United States reached a turning point. By executive order from the President the Rural Electrification Administration was created. The cooperative concept was the basis

for the REA and the hard working people of Taos and the surrounding area had no problem relating to this concept, for they had been co-operating with each other all their lives.

REA, however, was a fight from the start. Initially, it was formed to administer the Public Utilities Act of 1935. The purpose of this legislation was to create jobs during the Depression by building power lines to rural areas while attempting to consolidate power across the nation.

Prior to 1935, the control of electrical power had been totally in the hands of the private business sector. Exorbitant fees were being charged by these private power companies and service was limited to cities and excluded rural· communities. From the power companies' perspective there was no profit in serving rural customers.

This attitude greatly strengthened the cooperative concept of the REA. If a community could contribute two per cent or three subscribers per mile of line, the REA would support a power plant in the area.

At first the REA tried to convince private companies to build lines into rural areas using low interest government money. Most refused. Consequently, the REA had no choice but to help farmers and rural residents organize cooperatives which could then borrow money to finance the construction of community owned plants and to build their own lines.

n retaliation private power companies in many areas of the country built "spite lines" through cooperative territory in an attempt to render their system as economically unstable. It was a difficult and frustrating time for rural America.

Eventually the cooperative system took hold. Hundreds of electric cooperatives were organized and funded and the rural people of the nation, as well as the hard working people of Taos, cheered the efforts made by the REA to, "light up the farms".

In northern New Mexico the village of Taos had seen the light and the spirit of cooperation was on the move. Somehow the name Kit Carson would once again play a major role in the future of Taos and hard work would reign and tradition continue to rule, but that is another story.

Editor's Note: Mike Miller is a writer, historian, and staff member of the State Library in Santa Fe. He is an occasional contributor to Enchantment & Ayer Y Hoy.

Who Was Walter Willard Johnson?

by Dave Cordova

Walter Willard Johnson was born in 1897 in Illinois, but grew up in Greeley, Colorado where his father had lumber business. He had no interest in his father's business, turning his attention to more journalistic endeavors. After high school, he attended the Teachers College in Colorado for a short time before transferring to the University of California at Berkeley where he studied poetry and worked in the journalism field in the Bay area of California.

At 25 years of age, young Johnson came to New Mexico, gaining employment in Santa Fe with the wealthy poet Witter Bynner. Through Bynner, Walter became a part of the New Mexico literary scene which included such luminaries as Mary Austin, Carl Sandburg, Mabel Dodge Luhan, D.H. and Frieda Lawrence and Dorothy Brett. His association with the latter personalities was the probable motivation for Walter moving to Taos in 1927.

By now, this story is sounding a bit familiar, right? In Taos he continued to write and publish poetry and other prose, mostly consisting of editorials, but earned his living as Mabel Dodge Luhan's secretary for the next few years.

By the early 1930s, Walter Johnson was a prominent figure in New Mexico's literary and social scenes, known by his, now famous, moniker "Spud" Johnson.

Spud was able to support himself with his poetry and writing for several newspapers in New Mexico and in 1938, founded a small newspaper of editorial columns and news of the day under the title, "The Horse Fly".

The original Horsefly was published in Taos for about a year, during 1938 and 1939. He purchased a small printing press and started publishing the weekly newspaper with news and commentary of Taos Society. The newspaper's banner bore the name, "THE HORSE FLY", with the self-deprecating tag line of, "Smallest and Most Inadequate Newspaper Ever Published."

A friend gave me copies of several issues of The Horse Fly, though I don't know where my friend acquired them, it was more than likely that they came from Sam Buchanan. The issues are fun to read even if originally written almost 90 years ago, I found some timeless relevance in these pages.


Extra! Eight-Page Profusely Illustrated Fiesta Edition Extra!
THE HORSE FLY
Smallest and Most Inadequate Newspaper Ever Published

The typeset was very well done and had many illustrations. The first issue I have is from September 24, 1938 and focused on the "Oldest Fiesta In World", which was the San Geronimo celebrations at the Taos Pueblo and the Taos Plaza, with many "Ceremonies at the Pueblo" and parades and dances at the Taos Plaza. This issue had a bonus four pages of "Profusely Illustrated Fiesta Edition Extra!" Spud liked to use colored paper for his publications, paper which does not copy very well, but what we have is readable.

Walter Willard Johnson (continued on page 11)

"Restoring The Vigil House & Torreon In Talpa"

Written by Gail Wendorf

Since the summer of 2016, I have owned the old Vigil Farm House on the Talpa Ridge at 7216 Highway 518, Ranchos de Taos (Talpa). I am the first non-Vigil to have the pleasure and responsibility of owning this historic property. I've been steadily and carefully restoring the house and managed to get my full certificate of occupancy in summer 2019. There is more to do, always, but everything the County of Taos was concerned about has been done.

In purchasing the house, the title search found letters/papers from the Vigil family that were able to date the house as far back as 1750. We thought that it would be about 1830, since the old Talpa Torreon next door, that had been attached at one time to the house by either a wall along the west side, or another series of rooms (according to family legend) has a dendrochronology date on all the vigas of 1830. But this date is very much predated by the paperwork received during my title search.

The property also has a small building to the West of the House called "THE OLD FORGE", that MAY predate the house itself (accor ding to archaeolo gists), because of its purpose and location just alongside the Camino Real up the Talpa ridge above the Ranchos Valley, and into Talpa village.

One thing I would like to do is to get a better date for the *torreon* by digging through the 1960's poured cement floor to the blood floor so that I can possibly find charcoal that may predate the current dendrochronology date. I hope to nationally register the *torreon*, so figuring out these problems are important. With the house itself showing a date of 1750, and the start of the Comanche/ Apache wars in 1790 to (about)) 1860, it doesn't make sense for them to suddenly create a defensive tower (part of a chain of defensive towers from the southern Texas/NM border (made of stone), all the way up , through our valley and into So. Colorado) in 1830. The Vigil (Talpa) *torreon* is one of the final adobe towers standing from a historic time, so it has become important to the history of Taos County and New Mexico. And, I also found, when making the front door opening wider to accommodate a newly commissioned solid Pensco style door, puddled and hand rounded adobe bricks in the 30-inch-deep wall.

After my purchase of the Vigil house in July 2016, I spent 2 months sitting with it nearly every day, understanding what needed to be done. I began by removing any left wiring, plumbing, false ceilings, pony walls, extra small rooms made of rough milled wood and drywall, and flooring which uncovered evidence of a lot of water damage to the floor studs. I discovered blood floors underneath it all! Since the newer versions of NM 518 have been created, the drainage from the highway, down the drive, across the acacia ran right into and under the living room and bedroom floors, leaving a lot of silt behind and rotten studs. I managed to save maybe 60% of the original wood floorboards, and none of the floor studs. I also looked at the roof, once I'd cleared the inside of the house, and it had been covered over, a bit haphazardly with a low pitched roof of possibly 50's vintage (when the Rounds Lumber Co, and Buddy Boston saw mills up the Little Rio and Pot Creek came in and hired lots of the men in Talpa, Ranchos de Taos, and Llano Quemado). Roof joists were haphazardly placed and covered with long stretches of 1 and 2 by 8 boards (absolutely beautiful when I could save them), and once the roof was off, it was obvious they had just wired the roof structure to the vigas on the West side of the house to keep it on during the huge winds the Talpa Ridge gets, rather than create a bond beam and attach it there. This is one of the big reasons why the house was still standing. There was no cement used to help hold things together. The old tar paper roof was still in place over the last of the torta (mud) roof, when they took up the split cedar *latillas* and replaced it with dimensional lumber, then mud (to a thickness of about 8 inches). I left the roof alone from the last tarpaper thru the mud and the dimensional boards laid across the vigas. Only one section of the roof needed lifting along the seam where the intersection of 2 pitched roofs at a 90p angle, making an L-shaped building. That section of the roof had had a chronic leak.

I saw it's evidence on the wall of the former kitchen, though the thick wall had never sloughed. It had left mud on the inside of the house when they put up chicken wire and cement plaster on the outside, again in the 60's, and that mud just breathed, absorbed the water and let it dry out without damaging the wall, at all. I removed that section of the original mud roof and paper, took up the ceiling boards that were water logged, tested the vigas (which were solid, hard as nails), and allowed it all to dry out for weeks until we were able to finally build up a second, lumber and brie roof on top of the original paper roof, creating better drainage on all the 5 large rooms. Only in the living room roof did we change the drainage to the West side, as the rest of the canales were off that side as well. We did that because the original roof drained into a *canale* in the center of the living room (showing some damage down below – but nothing earthshattering), which ran off the portal roof right in front of the front door. The second complete roof allowed us to change all that, and put insulation in, run plumbing vent piping, etc., as well as run electrical wiring to all the sections in dry, safe channels before drilling through the old roof and ceiling to put in wiring for lighting in all the room ceilings.

Inside the house, I scraped off the single layer of latex paint that had been put on the room walls in probably the 80's or even 90's. This single paint layer didn't keep the wall from breathing and drying out when water got in and was easy to slough off with a trowel, leaving behind different layers of *aliz* (the fine *tierra amarilla* and *tierra blanca* mud mixed with water and milk to finish the mud plaster walls). In the living room and main bedroom, I have left the *aliz* colors and mud repairs, to show the life of the walls. The others needed to be completely covered in mud plaster after I scraped the latex off them.

The headers of the doors and windows are all juniper logs underneath the later dimensional lumber and Randall windows. Some windows are earlier than the basic Randall window and are a rough Victorian style. I love the changes this house shows over its 275 years so far.

I have reused as much of the early pitched roof wood as possible, the logs that were saved when the root cellar was covered over (not by me) have also been reused in the *torreon*, as well as a pergola that I made to help shade the west side of the house. I reused about 50% of the wood floor planking in the two bedrooms sub floors and decking. The living room needed all new boards, and I managed to find rough cut, 8' x 6" boards that had been seasoning outside for 9 months. I took them home, installed them and sanded the splinters. They are perfect for a farmhouse floor.

The blood/mud floors were all covered with a viscalene plastic to keep moisture out and protect the remaining blood floors, then depending on the level of the floors, so that I could have a place that had relatively level flooring, I placed anywhere from 3" to 18" (in this case, rubble first....once I'd buried the bathroom and kitchen piping in sand) of crusher fines – which happily reflects heat, unlike basic builder's sand. Then 2-inch rigid insulation that I repurposed from a casino in Albuquerque enough for all the floors. I also laid radiant floor heat tubing across all floors. In the case of the 3 rooms with wooden joists, I built the joist frame, set it on the crusher fines, and put the rigid insulation between the joists. Two of the rooms – the kitchen and the main bathroom, have bricks laid on more crusher fines that I had to hand tamp as I didn't have a machine tamper. (Which might also have destabilized the old walls as well. There is only a stone and mud foundation, so it's stable until you shake the floors!) Only then did I use real sand to brush between the bricks and stabilize the floor. The house is warm and cozy in winter, even without the plastic I still put on the windows 4 months a year, and in summer, if I can keep the doors and windows open till about 5 or 6 pm from say 8 am, the house stays cool and comfortable, even on the hottest days. Breezes are cool blowing across the 2 *portales*. The house truly breathes like a bellows. The west patio has 2 large trees, but the low afternoon/evening summer sun can bake the kitchen and second bedroom, so those windows and doors are shut later. Thus, the need to put up a pergola.

The parapet needed to be extended once we made the decision to do a simple, second roof structure, and it still has 5 working canales. I kept the original canales because they are made of old coke signs, and model T fenders and other bits of metal from farm equipment. They are a reminder how people kept reusing, recycling things, and adapting as the years passed.

There are also 4 ancient apricot trees, ancient pear trees, wild plums all fed by the acequia, and I've heard that there was a much bigger orchard/pasture once.

The *torreon* is still standing because it was reused as a storage house, so it was kept standing. I again sat with the building after it was gifted to me so that I could restore it. It is truly remarkable that it was still standing when I acquired it in 2023.

But the Taos Historical Society (preservation committee), had put 2 layers of mud plaster to help it, after removing the single layer of chicken wire and cement plaster that coated it (as well as my house) from the late 60's. Then it was covered in giant tarps, trying to slow the erosion of the walls. There was a section that had held a later dimensional wood door along with a second small window that collapsed when a chronic leak in the mud roof became too much and a viga in the center of the building cracked. Interestingly, once I took the tarp off and really studied the vigas (after removing the decking laid so the tarp could be secured to the building), they had endured much water damage (as did the inside wall over the cracked viga). The wall itself stayed stable, but all the inside mud plaster and *aliz* under that viga just washed off. I think that was when they put the structolite over the interior walls as well as the wire and cement plaster around the outside. The roof and wall collapsed after that. There is a photo of Antonio Vigil showing Helen Blumenshine the building in what looks like mid to late 50's, and there is no cement on the wall outside and the door and both small windows were there. A large third window was put in later as well...I though MUCH later – on the East side of the *torreon*... until I took off the dimensional lumber, and there is a massive juniper header. It wasn't there when the *torreon* was serving its purpose of "security/safety from marauders". But it might have been put in before the turn of the 19th to 20th century. That header could give us a date for that. I decided to keep the structure of the window in place, since it wasn't part of the historic purpose of the building. So, we just filled it in with adobes, not keying them into the wall or impacting the wall in any way, and mudding over it on the outside. On the inside, we decided to create a shelf with bricks so that the header can be seen. It is mudded up to the header, but the half log juniper header is very visible.

I rebuilt the roof as it would have been, with split cedar *latillas*, and reused the original split cedar *latillas* in their correct place and put new ones in the "front" half of the room. Then a layer of straw, and about 6 in. of mud roof. I placed a 6 x 4 in beam along the newly replaced viga so that we could then attach a 2x4 grid without drilling the old vigas, a sloped 5/8 in. plywood second roof to hold a simple brie roof. My helper, Antonio Gomez, also created a new *canale* to drain the roof, out of a good log from his wood pile. Also, in the ceiling, it is obvious where the original trap door once stood from the brushed shine on the existing viga just West of the new viga. So we put in a trap door as well. The settlers had to use a ladder to go to the roof, then put the ladder into the building, go down, and hide while (I assume) men but possibly women protected the people inside from the marauders.

As I said earlier, I need to clean off the construction mud from the floor, then lift all the cement from the blood floor. I need to do another layer of mud plaster, but with the *aliz* on ¾ of the interior wall still there, I'll just leave it at that, instead of doing a finer mud plaster.

There is now a door in the West side of the *torreon* (not from the historic purpose time), that can be seen in the photograph with Antonio Vigil and Helen Blumenshine. It was obvious when we were rebuilding the walls how low the door actually was. My helper and I created another door out of repurposed lumber from

my house, as well as some of the decking boards. One of the little windows was still present, the other had been destroyed in the cave in of the wall, so my helper rebuilt the little window, using reclaimed logs from the house as headers, (and then again with a log bond beam that was above the door and windows) and actually, elm sticks for the uprights. The elm is nearly as strong as oak, so was the perfect material. I also put plexiglass in front of both wood grids, to keep the interior drier and pest free.

This *torreon* will have a role in the future. It is my plan to gift it to an organization that will help get its National registration as a historic site done, will work with local groups to keep it available to the public by appointment and management of the upkeep of an old historic adobe that was so important to the settlement of the Taos valley. I also believe that they will be a great resource for the rest of the historic buildings in Taos County.

The final adobe plaster job on the *torreon* in October of 2024 was done by a group of volunteers from Taos Pueblo's RECOVERY WORKS.

"NEW MEXICO'S HISTORIC CHURCHES"
- MONUMENTS TO CULTURAL HERITAGE -
Written by Frank Graziano

The disuse of New Mexico's village churches has multiple causes. Functional obsolescence (no restrooms, poor heating) and planned obsolescence (throw away and replace) make contributions, but the most significant factor is a shortage of parishioners. The number of churches exceeds the number of Catholics needed to fill them. This disproportion is a consequence of village depopulation, secularization nationally, conversion to Protestant churches, and residents who self-identify as Catholic but do not attend mass.

A corresponding shortage of priests aggravates the problem. Historically priests would travel periodically from the mother church (the parish base, where generally the pastor resides) to the mission churches in the villages to say mass and administer sacraments. Today, with some exceptions, the congregations are too small and the priests too few to continue that arrangement, so the mission churches are closed, and the parishioners attend mass—sometimes reluctantly—at the mother church. Such centralization of sacraments accelerates obsolescence of the missions and will ultimately finalize it, because new generations no longer form the emotional and spiritual bonds that inspire commitment to mission church maintenance. When traditional attachments and commitments collapse, church collapse often follows. Eventually no one cares enough to intervene.

On the surface the question seems reasonable: Why restore a church that is rarely or never used? That question, however, presumes a causal link between preservation and utility. A broken chair is discarded—you can no longer sit in it—but if the chair is endowed with historical value (because Elvis sat in it, because Che Guevara was shot in it, because it is a throne) then its value shifts from utility to historicity and thereby the chair merits preservation, even though no one will ever sit in it—will ever be permitted to sit in it—again.

The historic value of mission churches may or may not be self-evident, but it seems to me that like archaeological ruins or Greek temples or historic forts the churches merit preservation regardless of their usefulness. Their value accrues over time even in disuse. They provide a tangible connection to the history of peoples, places, settlement, art and architecture, and hispanic Catholicism. And even given those significant historical associations, in the broad view historicity is almost incidental, because a church's worthiness for preservation emerges largely from several cultural heritage factors—social, spiritual, emotional, aesthetic, identity-related—with which the churches are imbued. The church as a symbol is more significant than the church as a functional building. As one priest put it, "If you're looking for utility, you could move a double-wide out there and be done with it."

Mission churches are monuments to self-identity and community identity; to faith, values, beliefs, regional manners of devotion, and cosmovision; to sense-of-place and the endurance of tradition; and to vernacular aesthetics in art and architecture. They are the locus of social practices, rituals and festivals, life-course milestones, religious everyday life, and the presences, including divinity, associated with the church; and they are the repository of prayer, oral tradition, social and cultural customs and responsibilities, collective memory, personal memories, cultural pride, ancestry, and legacy. All of these intangible qualities are conveyed by the village church, even when it is empty.

VILLAGESCAPE AND CULTURAL LANDSCAPES

While I was researching for my book Historic Churches of New Mexico Today I interviewed a former governor of Picurís Pueblo, whose tenure coincided with a collapsing church that needed to be removed or rebuilt. The governor was decidedly anti-Catholic but nevertheless supported rebuilding the church. When I asked him why, his answer suggested that even though many people do not use the church, and that some resent it, and that most dissociate it from Catholicism, its demolition would leave a conspicuous

void—almost like a wound—at the center of the village. At Picurís as at many pueblos and Hispanic villages, the church is a landmark, a centerpiece, essential to the character and visual identity of a village. The arguments for preservation in this perspective are not historical or religious but rather concern village identity and sense of place. At the same time, in reciprocity, the value of the churches themselves is place-dependent, which is to say that the meanings with which they are imbued would dissipate if the churches were relocated to an alien cultural context.

Many rural churches have a claim to preservation solely on the basis of their beauty in natural landscapes. The sculptural forms of adobe make these churches seem massive artworks situated in the niches of the extraordinary settings selected for their construction. San Agustín in the Gallinas River Valley, the Mora Chapel in Cieneguilla backdropped by basalt cliffs and adjacent to native ruins, San Rafael in La Cueva and many other Mora County churches are all exceptional in this

regard, and they further attest to the interaction of settlers and the wilderness within which they developed their cultures and lifestyles. We witness at such sites, as UNESCO put it, "the evolution of human society and settlement over time, under the influence of physical constraints and/or opportunities presented by their natural environment." Earlier, in 1925, Carl Sauer wrote: "The cultural landscape is fashioned from a natural landscape by a culture group. Culture is the agent, the natural area is the medium, the cultural landscape the result." At rural settlements, accordingly, the preservation of churches resonates across the broader domain of cultural landscapes.

AESTHETIC AND SPIRITUAL EMOTIONS

Even people who are not religious are often moved to visceral spontaneous emotional reactions by the sacred mood of the Santuario de Chimayó, and for believers the chapel is the paradigm of an ambience conducive to divine presence. At the Santuario

one confronts not the grandiose cathedral awe of almighty God but rather a human-scale humility, an unpretentious intimacy and authenticity characteristic of adobe churches. As a former Franciscan put it, "At Chimayó you meet the incarnation—here's Jesus in the manger." Intense aesthetic and emotional responses also occur to a lesser degree at the few churches that retain their historic santero altar screens. Everything is out of square and out of plumb and chaotic combinations of whites and browns and textures and still movement and massing interact with cool air and a warm vibe and dense silence before culminating with the accomplished naiveté of folk-art altars exuding the cultural confidence of being simply what they are.

Such qualities merit restoration even in the absence of a congregation. And when parishioners are present and engaged, restoration—even restoration by outside contractors—has an inspirational, motivational effect, stimulating a rejuvenation of hope because the church presumed lost is redeemed. Sponsored restorations often inspire subsequent efforts by mayordomos (church caretakers) and parishioners, including interior cleaning or refurbishing and initiatives to resume religious services. When mayordomos and parishioners themselves begin and complete a restoration—as happened recently at Mesa Poleo and La Puebla—the emotional and motivational benefits are redoubled. Inspiration also occurs in another context when countless people—parishioners and visitors—are motivated by the aesthetic qualities of a church. The Santuario is a clear case in point, as is San Francisco de Asís in Ranchos de Taos, whose sculptural buttresses are endlessly rendered in photographs and paintings. Restoration of such sites preserves the church as a historic building and at once as a work of art.

The word "heritage" (from Old French, "that which may be inherited") denotes the property and cultural knowledge passed to subsequent generations. As Susan M. Pearce put it, the word "presupposes an intrinsic relationship between those who went before and those who come after, with concomitant notions of responsibility and 'holding in trust'." People in Hispanic villages and at native pueblos are mindful of this trust (although it weakens as fewer younger people hold such convictions) but often lack the means to meet the responsibility that they have inherited. Generally, the responsibility falls to a small group of aging residents incapable of the investment and physical labor required for restoration. Resort to outside help is frequently regarded as capitulation, as a loss of independence and a disruption of continuity and a dishonor to the ancestors who built and maintained the church dutifully for centuries. These sentiments have impeded the involvement of outsiders but presently attitudes are changing and mayordomos and communities are more receptive to collaboration with Grantmakers and with nonprofit organizations dedicated to preservation. In the case of one such organization, Nuevo México Profundo, which I direct, initial resistance at many sites has evolved into long-term partnerships.

Vernacular architecture refers to traditional building practices that have developed over time and that reflect a people's cultural identity and heritage within a specific region. It is characterized by the use of available resources—dirt, wood—and locally innovated construction methods implemented by community craftsmen. The presence of heritage vernacular architecture today makes a substantial contribution to local identity, as is clear in the strong association of adobe and New Mexico. One could say without exaggeration that adobe architecture (and chile) are principal elements of the state's identity. The visual appeal of adobe buildings, the uniqueness that distinguishes them from other constructions—is a significant factor in the attraction of visitors. Adobe exudes charm—encanto, the land of enchantment—epitomized by historic churches.

The survival of adobe traditions, among other traditions globally, is threatened by accelerated cultural and architectural homogenization, which in many cases entails a crass assimilation to a plastic vanilla aesthetic. The progressive uniformity of cultures worldwide challenges diversity of all sorts, and the economic-driven common denominator toward which cultures homogenize seems less an advance than a surrender. In New Mexico the decline of traditional adobe construction—which is labor intensive and expensive when contracted—is apparent in the introduction of mobile homes and mass-produced adobe-like structures (yielding wordplays like Santa Fake and Fanta Se).

Places are like mirrors: in homes, hometowns, and homeland we see ourselves reflected. Place-attached identity is strong in New Mexico, particularly among native-born residents, and likewise place attributes contribute to how we are perceived externally. The loss of the traditional villagescape and cityscape and landscape weaken the bond between self and place and inspires a quest to maintain whatever is left, to defend an identity bound to vanishing legacy and a jeopardized sense-of-place. Saving churches will not eliminate the ill effects of homogenization, but it will conserve authenticity and beauty and cultural heritage within the proliferation of newness around them. The more we lose to homogenization, the more the churches stand out as exemplars.

Photos by Frank Graziano and: San Lorenzo de Picurís by Pedro Lastra; the Santuario interior by Patricia Highsmith; and San Francisco in Ranchos de Taos by John Benigno.

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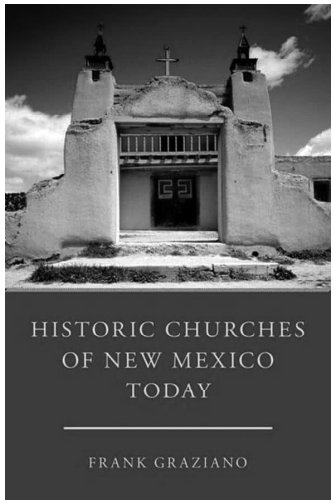
Frank Graziano directs Nuevo México Profundo, a nonprofit organization dedicated to cultural heritage preservation at historic churches. His books include Cultures of Devotion: Folk Saints of Spanish America (2007), Miraculous Images and Votive Offerings in Mexico (2016), and Historic Churches of New Mexico Today (2019), all published by Oxford University Press.



Walter Willard Johnson (continued on page 11)

The articles are brief and bear humorous tones within the more somber news of the day. In this issue, complete with advertising for business long defunct and lost to history but giving us a glimpse of the businesses of 1938 in Taos.

This particular issue gives a short narrative about the Fiesta of San Geronimo and his interjection that the participants are grateful that the Fiesta comes but once a year.

It also gives some details about the scheduled festivities during the three days of the Fiesta and a very stern warning (tongue in cheek), to the young ladies by an illustration of a "floozy": "This, my chickadees, is one of those very senoritas & if you don't know how to take care of yourself – well, you'd better be careful. There was a shotgun wedding in our town as recently as last Sunday."

The advertising:

VILLAGE FRAMES
Genuine Gold & Silver Leaf
Orders from out of town handled promptly
***
SEE THE BEST IN THE SOUTHWEST
with the
CARSON TOURS
W.W. Bragg, Manager
***
Contractors - Builders
O.C. HERDENER & SON
***
For Discriminating Travellers
SAGEBRUSH INN
— HOME OF THE JUG –
***
Good Gulf Gas – Gulf Pride Oil
NONE BETTER
SANFORD STATION
Phone 157

Tuesday & Wednesday
The Ritz Brothers
& Tony Martin in
"KENTUCKY MOONSHINE"
TAOS THEATRE
***
Hoffman House Bar
Headquarters of the Mexican Army the Year Round
GAYEST SPOT ON THE PLAZA
***
SISNEROS GROCERY & MARKET IS WHERE TO BUY GOOD FOOD
***
I'll Meet You At
HELEN'S SANDWICH SHOP
And Eat Good Home Cooking
While I Wait

All in one issue. I'm enjoying reading these historical pages. Walter Willard "Spud" Johnson passed away in 1968.

Lectures & Special Events for 2026
(Tentative Schedule)

February 7th - 2 PM
"GROWING UP IN TAOS"
by Carlos Arguello & Tom McCarthy

March 7th - 2 PM
"HISTORY OF POT CREEK & EARLY PEOPLE OF TAOS"
by John Ublelaker

April 4th - 2 PM
"NEW MEXICO RAILROAD"
by Fred Friedman

May 7th - 2 PM
HONOREE LUNCHEON - TBA
Presenter-Andy Torres

June 6th - Field Trip
THE CORDOVA MOLINO IN VADITO
by Jose Gustavo Cordova

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The Taos County Historical Society was formed in 1952 for the purpose of "...preserving the history of the Taos area." This part of New Mexico has a fascinating history, full of people, events, stories and places.
If you are interested, we invite your participation in our field trips or lecture programs, or by supporting the Society by becoming a member.

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Business	$60

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