Reclaiming HISTORY

six local visionaries focused squarely on the past

We gathered some of our most beloved preservationists—from the director of Cornerstones’ rebuilding projects to the founder of Santa Fe’s Living Treasures program—for a few lessons in local history.

From left: Nora Naranjo-Morse, John Berkenfield, Mary Lou Cook, Nancy Meem Wirth, and Julie Hare. Photographed inside the Miguel Vega y Coca house, built about 1719, El Rancho de las Golondrinas’s oldest building. Alicia Vega’s house now serves as a chapel.
There needs to be a revival of oral history. Older people from the pueblos should be available for storytelling and sharing of historical information to younger generations. We need more Native writers, scholars, historians, filmmakers, and artists who will articulate Native history for us and for our children. Our children need to be armed with a sense of cultural pride and historical knowledge, which of course is crucial to our survival and beyond.

What single element of Pueblo history do you think is most often overlooked or underappreciated? The relationship between the culture of the past and the culture as it is now needs to be reevaluated. When we start connecting the past to the present and using these valuable lessons for our empowerment, then we can expect a cultural and personal renaissance.

Every society has an obligation to give people insight into what came before.

—John Berkenfield

Nora Naranjo-Morse, Artist, Author

Nora Naranjo-Morse (Santa Clara Pueblo) is an internationally acclaimed ceramic artist, author, and filmmaker whose work offers thoughtful—and thought-provoking—social commentary, especially as it looks at the continuing social changes within Pueblo culture. Her sculpture has been exhibited at the White House, and she was winner of the National Museum of the American Indian’s 2007 outdoor-sculpture design competition. Her videos have been screened at the Native American Film and Video Festival and elsewhere.

On the occasion of Albuquerque’s 400th anniversary, Naranjo-Morse was commissioned by the Albuquerque Museum to create Numbe Whageh, a conceptual, environmental artwork responding to La Frenaldita, a memorial sculpture depicting Don Juan de Oñate’s arrival in what is now New Mexico.

What was the message you wanted to convey through Numbe Whageh (Our Center Place), and why did you feel it was necessary?

When I was in grade school, history textbooks focused on Oñate as a hero on a horse claiming uncharted territory for the king of Spain. There was no mention of the horrific violence during his colonization toward the original inhabitants of New Mexico; no mention of slavery or religious oppression; no history telling from the Native perspective. The message of Numbe Whageh is far too important and vital to the history of New Mexico to become a one-paragraph sound bite for a mainstream audience. We need to learn the real meaning of the word hero. How can we get young people interested in history? If we don’t know where we’ve been, as a society, how can we know where we’re going?

What is an important part of our history that is often overlooked or underappreciated?

Barbara and I came out here as active, consistent visitors for five or six years before we moved here, and in that period we were struck by the richness of the Indian culture. What I didn’t know about was the depth and richness of the Hispanic culture. The Hispanic culture is more blended into the dominant culture, and I think there’s always the risk that it becomes integrated too thoroughly into the mainstream. That’s a genuineness in what we do at Las Golondrinas that I find enthralling. For example, we could put asphalt emulsion into the coating for buildings, but we don’t, we just use mud. And when we rebuilt the water wheel, no power tools were used. We used lumber from a steam-powered sawmill in Arkansas, and over a period of two years, three guys built it using only hand tools. Also, visitors can try things themselves, like making soap in the context of explaining why people in the old days had to make it. Nothing to me is as satisfying as a visit at Las Golondrinas and having a light go off and the kid says, “Oh, that’s why Grandma does that!” Or, “That’s why our houses have that roof and våg!”

Why is this kind of presentation critical?

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John Berkenfield, Director, El Rancho de Las Golondrinas

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Mary Lou Cook, of course, is one such treasure herself. Cook, who turns 90 in April, grew up in El Paso and Kansas City and has taught calligraphy around the United States. Her first calligraphy client in Santa Fe, shortly after she moved here 40 years ago, was architect John Gaw Meem, who asked her to create a certificate honoring early-20th-century philanthropist Amelia White. Cook also provides as a minister and bishop over non-denominational weddings, memorials, and blessings of everything from babies to offices.

Why is Living Treasures an important part of preserving Santa Fe’s history?

Because it brings alive the warmth and humaneness of names on a page. One of the interesting things I’ve learned about these elders is that they continue to work, to serve. Retirement is not in their vocabulary. By getting to know these remarkable people, with their inner strength, courage, determination, humor, and wisdom, we learn the real meaning of the word hero. How can we get young people interested in history? On Living Treasures’ 10th anniversary, we came up with a one-page list of questions for interviewing people. Since then, Bob Story and I have been working within the schools, teaching kids (sixth grade and up) how to interview family members, grandparents, and neighbors. I think this is a very basic thing to stress, that kids can become their families’ historians. It also helps with consciousness, because in learning about others they learn to get outside themselves.

How do you gauge the success of Living Treasures? The program has gotten national attention. I’ve been interviewed by Tom Brokaw. We’ve received requests from at least 350 communities around the country for the free booklet we put together on how to establish a Living Treasures program. But also, at the Living Treasures ceremonies everyone realizes how history does come alive. The ceremonies are always a site to recognize event. It’s so sweet.

Mary Lou Cook, Founder, Living Treasures

For most of us, learning about history in school meant memorizing names of dead men as books. Thanks to Mary Lou Cook and others who founded Northern New Mexico Living Treasures in 1984, it can mean learning about people in our midst who are a living part of history. Twice a year, Living Treasures honors three community members (70 or older) who have played an important role in the community, either in the public sphere or behind the scenes.

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Preserving Santa Fe’s historic architectural beauty has long been the focus of Nancy Meem Wirth’s time and energy—not surprising for the daughter of John Gaw Meem, whose name is synonymous with Southwestern architecture. Raised in Santa Fe, Wirth lived for a number of years in California, where her husband, John, taught Latin American history at Stanford University. After returning to Santa Fe in 1991, she became founding president of Cornerstones Community Partnerships and was involved with the Spanish Colonial Arts Society, the Santa Fe Conservation Trust, and other local organizations. Among other awards, she was honored with the 2004 City of Santa Fe Heritage Preservation Award, and last year was included in the New Mexico Community Foundation’s Luminarias and Legacies program. Wirth currently sits on the state’s Cultural Properties Review Committee.

How did growing up as the daughter of such an esteemed architect shape your sense of historic Santa Fe and the value of preserving that history? I learned from my father to care deeply about my community. He was always involved in historic preservation in Santa Fe. In his architecture, he strove for beautifully proportioned simplicity and finely crafted details. He believed in using contemporary materials, but refining them to evoke the architectural history he saw around him. He demanded quality, but often simplified it to create affordable spaces. He worked hard to make Santa Fe a beautiful place for Santa Feans.

What could we do better to preserve Santa Fe’s history? Perhaps the best way would be to clarify the sometimes-contentious divide between preserving a historic look for Santa Fe and welcoming more contemporary elements? I think the tension between the historic and the contemporary is not an unhealthy thing. That conversation focuses our attention on the uniqueness of our city and hopefully keeps us dedicated to keeping it that way. Long-established historic zones should be respected and honored. An example of a good compromise is happening in our new and wonderful Railyard area.

NANCY MEEM WIRTH
HISTORIC ADVOCATE

Cornerstones’ most significant work has been in the rural villages of New Mexico and the Southwest. However, Santa Fe has benefited much of the volunteer labor to carry out our preservation efforts. In Santa Fe, we are just now gearing up to begin the preservation of the historic San Miguel Chapel, known affectionately as the “Oldest Church.” The project will finally bring our 22-year-old program to the heart of the city that gave Cornerstones its start. What could we do better to preserve Santa Fe’s history? What do we consider our most important contribution to preserving New Mexico’s history? The gracious old folks I’ve interviewed truly represent the last vestiges of our cultural and linguistic legacy. We have known it for centuries. The breadth and scope of information they provided is phenomenal. It ranges from religious functions, popular festivities, foods, politics, music, and folklore (e.g., witchcraft and the supernatural) to chronicling New Mexico’s history.

What do you consider your most important contribution to preserving New Mexico’s history? The gracious old folks I’ve interviewed truly represent the last vestiges of our cultural and linguistic legacy. We have known it for centuries. The breadth and scope of information they provided is phenomenal. It ranges from religious functions, popular festivities, foods, politics, music, and folklore (e.g., witchcraft and the supernatural) to chronicling New Mexico’s history.

NASARIO GARCIA
AUTHOR, SCHOLAR

Folklorist, author, scholar, and storyteller Nasario Garcia has spent the past 50 years gathering and transcribing interviews, and black-and-white photos (old as well as recent portraits) constitute a modest yet integral part of archival holdings for current and future generations.

What would we do better to preserve our history? First and foremost we must teach our children early on that, absent a knowledge of history, one’s society is histrionic, lifeless, and apt to engender ignorance.

—NASARIO GARCIA

JAMES HARE
DIRECTOR, CORNERSTONES

James Hare is executive director of Cornerstones Community Partnerships, a Santa Fe–based, nationally acclaimed nonprofit organization that restores historic structures by enlisting community partnerships and focusing on traditional building practices. A 71-year-old Denver native, Hare holds a master’s degree in historic preservation from Baltimore’s Goucher College, where he received the school’s McCollough Scholarship for Outstanding Thesis. His study of historic preservation in Santa Fe and Charleston, S.C., will be included as a chapter in the forthcoming book Challenges in Compatibility: Design in Historic Preservation, (University of Delaware Press). Info: cornerstones.org

What’s the most significant project Cornerstones has done right here in Santa Fe, and why is that structure an important part of our history? We overlook the fact that our predecessors managed to create a durable architectural environment by making use of the materials they had at hand. Their system worked very well until we started to think we could do it better with modern construction materials.

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