

Putting the Art in Artesia

All it took was the largest fresco-moving project the world has ever seen.

BY DAVID PIKE | PHOTOS BY JENNIFER COATS



The Artesia Public Library was designed to showcase the 1952 Peter Hurd mural *The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare for It*, which originally occupied a Houston office building.

Artesia

THE BEST PLACE to admire the beautiful Peter Hurd mural in the new public library in Artesia is from outside the library itself. Across the street. At night. The north library wall is glass, allowing an unobstructed view of the enormous piece, which stretches 46 feet wide and 15 high across an arc that spans the main reading room. From across the street, you experience the piece in full: a pastoral farm scene during harvest season, when the bounty of fruits and vegetables is being canned.

A mother and daughter chat beside a tree while the father dumps apples into a basket. A cowboy gallops past a windmill on his horse. Other figures—a wagon master, a government conservationist, a little boy—go about the business of daily living. As was his gift, Hurd made the everyday beautiful. His mural captures the geometry of a moment, the beauty of an instant. And in the evening, the Artesia twilight elevates that beauty to elegance. The library shelves disappear in the dark, and the mural, raised nine feet off the floor, appears to float suspended over the circulation desk, as if the library were designed around it—which, actually, it was.

As evening tints the air blue and a soft breeze wanders the city, the ambience of the outside world merges with the images on the mural, invigorating them with passion and life. The mural becomes dynamic, fully and brilliantly alive. It moves. The mechanical bustle of the train passing through Artesia a block away is surely the crank of the windmill in the mural. A dog is barking somewhere out among the old houses in the neighborhood south of the library—or maybe it's the one in the foreground beside the little boy. The same breeze fluttering the flags on the library flagpole also rustles the leaves in the enormous tree that bisects and frames the painting, offering shade and shelter to the people underneath, including you.

The second-best place to admire the mural is from inside the library, between call numbers 574.5 (Naturalism) and 646.77 (Dating). Because here, just the opposite happens. Here, the image appears in freeze frame and the world it contains seems self-consciously silent, as if the people in the mural are aware they're in a library and are holding still so as not to disturb the patrons. In that suspended state, you don't hear sound itself so much as the anticipation of it: the unheard thump of the apples just about to fall into the basket, the splash the water in the tank will make when the young boy completes his dive, the cautionary word the mother is about to offer her child as she steadies him on the table. This would have been a very noisy mural if Hurd had painted it a second later.

It's there, in that anticipation of things to come, that you find the main theme of the work, stated succinctly in the title: *The Future Belongs to Those Who Prepare for It*. That idea is as appropriate for a library as it was for the Prudential Insurance Company, which commissioned the piece in 1951 for its regional headquarters in Houston. The journey of the mural from there to here is a story of a lot of dedicated people and a lot of dedicated effort. It's the story of a mural, certainly, but there's a larger story here: one about a community and what it chooses to value.

Like any good story, this ends with a last-minute twist that nobody saw coming. But to get there, I have to start much earlier. That's why I'm standing at a remote spot in the desert east of Artesia, a spot with the prosaic name Sec. 32-T18S-R28E. Cattle meander around me as pump jacks nod rhythmically in the afternoon sun—here, as in the city itself, the twin economies of ranching and oil blend. Minus the pump jacks, the landscape I'm seeing isn't much different from the one Martin and Mary Yates would have seen in their Model T one afternoon back in 1924. Martin and his partners had twice tried unsuccessfully to sink a productive discovery well. Frustrated, Martin put his faith in women's intuition and asked his wife for help. He and Mary drove until she pointed to a spot she thought promising. A photograph taken later shows the result of that point: the derrick of the Flynn-Welch-Yates Illinois Number 3, its top obliterated by gushing black oil. It was the first commercially successful well on state land in New Mexico, and the first to pay a royalty to the state—all of \$159.

I'm at that very spot. Today, the wellhead is capped, surrounded by a metal fence painted yellow. In contrast to the change it brought to New Mexico, the well itself is unassumingly low-key. You might even say humble.

This well was the impetus for the oil-and-natural-gas boom that took off in southeastern New Mexico and continues today, courtesy of oil-rich formations underlying the Permian Basin here and through West Texas. With the industry as an economic leader, the city of Artesia grew, weathering the ups and downs of an oil town. It's a pretty city, with a tree-lined, two-lane Main Street fronted by office buildings and stores, and adorned with bronze sculptures of people important to the history of the city, including Martin and Mary Yates. About 12,000 people live here. Many of them work jobs connected to the oil-and-gas industry, either in the fields surrounding the city or in the office buildings that support them downtown. They eat barbecue at Henry's,



they get drinks at the Wellhead Restaurant and BrewPub after a show at the Ocotillo Performing Arts Center, and they spend Friday nights cheering the Artesia High School football team out at the massive Bulldog Bowl sports stadium.

The Yates family, meanwhile, went on to found Yates Petroleum in Artesia. Back in the 1930s, S.P. Yates, one of Martin and Mary's four sons, traveled to Boston to study at MIT. There he met Boston native Estelle Hefler on a blind date. The two wed and moved back to Artesia, where they raised three children. Estelle served as vice president of Yates Drilling Company, engaged herself in a number of civic offices, and in her spare time became an accomplished painter and potter.

Estelle Yates loved her family, and she loved Artesia. But if you ask anyone who knew her, they'll lead by telling you how humble she was, outright refusing recognition for her acts of philanthropy for others and for the community.

his work to the public eye, and by the time Estelle reached out to him, he was nationally known. Indeed, commissions were keeping him very busy, he explained in his response to Estelle's inquiry, and he was regrettably unable to accommodate her request.

That first library served the community admirably, but it was showing its age by 2010. Artesia needed a new one.

“I can remember when I was kid growing up that I knew Mrs. Yates,” Artesia mayor Phil Burch tells me as we sit at a conference table in his office, historic photos of Artesia on the wall. Then he laughs: “And Mrs. Yates knew the little troublemaker Phil Burch.”

But as she and Peyton and the mayor sat together at this table a few years back, it was all business. Estelle made an incredible offer: If the city would build a library, she would pay for half of it.

“That’s the flavor of the community we live in,” Mayor Burch explains. “If there’s something needed in this city, you go to enough people, you’ll find someone willing to say, ‘I’ll take that on.’”

The city agreed to that generous offer. A private-public partnership would need to be formed and donations solicited. A design committee would be required, comprising community members—but no members of the Yates family, by their own choice, so that their presence wouldn’t influence the committee’s decisions. And a complex Rubik’s Cube of land swaps would need to be worked out to create a lot for the new library. Everyone wanted it downtown, an anchor amid the eclectic mix of enterprises that make up this oil-and-ranching city—the Western-wear-and-boot store, the Navajo oil refinery, the First American Bank, the offices of the local petroleum companies—so that it would belong to everyone. And, not incidentally, that would put it near the bronze sculpture of Sally Chisum, the woman upon whose ranch Artesia was founded in the late 19th century. Sally is depicted holding a book in her hand, surrounded by an eager young boy and girl, to whom she is reading.

And then there was the mural itself. Plans for the new library were already under way when the committee learned that the owners of the former Prudential building in Houston, now part of MD Anderson Cancer Center, were offering a Peter Hurd mural in their lobby free to anyone who could move it. When Hurd painted the mural back in 1952, the building was new; he painted as employees and customers watched. He painted

people he knew into the mural, including his daughter (the young woman under the tree) and his son (the boy with the dog). Hurd himself is there too, as a cowboy leaning against a truck. But now the old building was slated for demolition, and the mural had to be removed. The logistics of doing so were overwhelming. As a fresco painted into plaster, the mural couldn’t simply be removed from the wall—it *was* the wall. It would need to be stored somewhere while the library was built. Further, upon its arrival in Artesia, the mural would need to be secured immediately inside a climate-controlled space. That meant that it would somehow need to be placed into a building that was already completely enclosed.

The challenges seemed insurmountable. The project needed a taskmaster comfortable with the impossible.

As I’m waiting to visit with José M. Zelaya, the Albuquerque-based architect for the library, I find a moment to rest in the calm oasis of the main reading room and take in the mural again. The farm scene seems so pragmatic, the people so distinctive, I can’t help but feel that it all seems familiar, like something out of my own life in New Mexico from many years ago. That’s part of the allure. The mural creates a sense of belonging, as if you could close your eyes, summon your willpower to the task, and open them to find yourself looking *out*, not *at*.

“When working on the sketches for the library,” José tells me, “I imagined the square of the main collection as a public square—a public plaza. Because this is the one last democratic space we have. The library is like a plaza. It just happens to have a roof.”

José led nine separate meetings with the community, with mothers, young people, members of the law enforcement community, native Spanish speakers, and others to solicit input on what they wanted from their library. He leads me on a tour of the library, pointing out some of the features that came from those meetings. I’m struck by how the mural is not just part of the library—it’s incorporated into it. The mural is elevated, stationed on a platform nine feet off the ground, an idea that José proposed. It was a risky approach, to raise what had once been a wall up off the ground. But it works, elevating the piece literally and metaphorically, as befits public art, allowing everyone to see it. Just like a stage, José tells me, the people in the mural performing their own drama.

But the most prominent design element isn’t tangible. It’s the feeling of responsibility this city has toward its youth. Children have their own reading room and crafts area, which you enter through a small hallway with something akin to laser lights in the ceiling. The teens’ area on the opposite side of the library is raised so that they can, as they requested, “see and be seen.”

All this attention to young people is consistent with other ways the city helps its youth. At the last county fair, after the national anthem was sung against a chorus of braying cattle, more than half a million dollars went through the sale ring in one morning. The Bulldog Bowl stadium includes a museum devoted to student athletes. And the local Chase Foundation, started by Mack and Marilyn Chase of Mack Energy Corporation, provides college scholarships to any student from Artesia who maintains a certain grade point average. Though the oil business can be up and down, the boom cycles have brought wealth to the city, much of which is invested in the future.

In Artesia, Elizabeth Stephens and Sandi Lanning are known as the “Library Ladies.” Friends of Estelle Yates, they joined the library board and served on the library design committee, and later formed the Friends of the Library.

“It was a commitment to Estelle as much as to the project,” Elizabeth tells me.

I soon learn the depth of that commitment. The committee had discussions about the role of libraries today to be sure they were building a facility that mattered. They drafted the RFP for the project and interviewed and selected the architect. And they decided the ultimate fate of the mural. With other members of the committee, Elizabeth and Sandi flew to Houston after learning about the mural to decide if it was worth bringing to Artesia. After seeing the piece, the group found that a vote wasn’t necessary.

“We couldn’t leave it,” Sandi recalls.

And so, months later, the rescue effort began. A Houston crew cut the wall from the building, then stabilized it on both sides with plastic, foam, and plywood, all held in place with steel braces. All was going well until the heat of a steel beam being welded into place ignited the cloth covering the mural. The flames were quickly extinguished, but pieces of the mural were damaged and soot had created scars on the right side of the panorama. The damage was stabilized on-site, but full repairs would need to happen later.

After the metal cage holding the mural was secured inside a crate, crews lifted the giant box onto wheels and pulled it from the building, an inch at a time, onto newly hardened cement poured to ensure the area outside the building was level. Then workers lifted it by crane onto a trailer specially configured for that purpose. According to Logistics Group International, it was the largest fresco painting ever moved in one piece.

For the people in the mural, it must have been a strange experience, leaving the only home they’d ever known. But they weren’t alone. Elizabeth was there as the mural came out of the building, and she followed the truck on its three-day journey on the back roads of West Texas to the airport

THERE WAS NO WAY OF KNOWING FOR SURE IF THE MURAL WAS STILL INTACT, OR WHETHER THE TRIP HAD TAKEN A FATAL TOLL AND THE PIECE WAS NOW A MOSAIC.

And then they’ll tell you that she loved books.

“She was our own private librarian,” Peyton Yates recalls of his mother and her affinity for the written word. “She always told us what we needed to read.”

Estelle chose to share that passion with the community. Originally, a stack of shelves in the basement of City Hall was all Artesia had for a library. As president of the library board in the 1950s, Estelle was instrumental in getting a new building built for that purpose, the city’s first real library. For a fundraiser for that library, Estelle had once reached out to artist Peter Hurd, whom she knew through a mutual friend, and asked if he might loan some of his art for the occasion. Hurd was a logical choice. Born in Roswell, Hurd depicted the the Southwestern landscapes and people he had known as a child: cowboys building fences, windmills and water tanks, weathered ranch houses isolated by furrowed grasslands, all done in a softly contoured style influenced by his teacher, the artist N. C. Wyeth—whose daughter, Henriette, married Peter. Hurd’s illustrations for *Life* magazine during World War II had helped bring

NEED TO KNOW

THE ARTESIA PUBLIC LIBRARY is open Monday through Saturday. (575) 746-4252; artesianm.gov/146/Library

THE ARTESIA CHAMBER OF COMMERCE AND VISITOR CENTER offers free walking tours of downtown, Monday through Friday. (575) 746-2744; artesiachamber.com

THE OCOTILLO PERFORMING ARTS CENTER, home of the Artesia Arts Council, offers contemporary and classic plays, concerts, and storytelling events in a resplendent performance space that once housed a movie theater. (575) 746-4212; artesiaartscouncil.com

DINING

THE WELLHEAD RESTAURANT AND BREWPUB offers good food and beers brewed on-site in a relaxed atmosphere that showcases artifacts and photos of the oil industry. (575) 746-0640; on Facebook

The library counts its youngest patrons among the most important ones.



in Midland, Texas, where Sandi joined her. Together they watched as the mural was unloaded from the truck and placed inside one of the hangars, where it would be stored until the library was completed.

There was no way of knowing for sure if the mural was still intact, or whether the trip had taken a fatal toll and the piece was now, in Peyton Yates' words, "a mosaic." In its crate, the mural was, in effect, a 65,000-pound Schrödinger's cat: unseen, unable to be admired, and so both art and not art at the same time. Only when the library was finished and the mural could be uncrated and installed would the cat, so to speak, be let out of the crate. And it would be another two years before that happened.

August 29, 2013, was a hot day, but that didn't stop people from lining the streets of downtown Artesia, some with coolers filled with drinks, some sitting in the back of pickup trucks. Some stood on the roofs of buildings to watch. Just after noon, to a chorus of cheers and applause, the truck came into view. The driver—the same one who had driven the mural from Houston to Midland—maneuvered the corner onto First Street, passed the feed store and the McDonald's while the utility companies held the power and phone lines aloft so the crate could pass safely, and with one hand on the steering wheel and the other holding his cigarette, effortlessly backed the truck into the library parking lot.

The architect, José, along with the Jaynes Corporation of Albuquerque, which had constructed the library, had developed a novel solution to the challenge of getting the mural into the building. They'd designed the roof so that one section was detachable. In movements described by onlookers as a "ballet," a crane from Wilbanks Logistics of Artesia deftly lowered the crate through the narrow opening onto a platform of 12 columns inside.

"Exhilarating," project manager Richard Hefler recalls of that day. "And exhausting."

After all the work, after all the waiting and anticipating, there was not even the satisfaction of an immediate answer to the question on everyone's mind. It came slowly, as each section of protective linen was removed individually and the mural underneath inspected by the conservator. Two crews worked for a week, moving from the sides toward the center. Piece by piece, section by section, the mural came back to life—the cowboys at the pickup truck and the mother and the baby and the dog and the boy all released from confinement, resurrected from the darkness, unharmed, taking their first nervous look at their new home.

Conservators re-created the fire-damaged section based on earlier photos of the mural. They worked even after the library opened, allowing patrons to watch. What might otherwise have been devastating became an important part of the story.

"After all the mural's been through," Richard Hefler

says, "the fire gave the story some character. It's like a racing yacht that comes back from a voyage and has a scar on the hull. You think, 'It really went somewhere!'"

Ultimately, the mural itself had proven the truth of its own message: The future did belong to those who had prepared for it.

"The mural has come to its final resting place," Estelle Yates told her caregiver, Victoria Hurlbut, after learning it was safely installed at the library.

"Yes, ma'am, it has," Victoria answered.

A few weeks later, Estelle Yates passed away quietly in her home. She was 95.

This story started with an oil well, and it ends with a three-drawer, burl-wood dresser, the one in which Victoria Hurlbut found the letter.

Victoria is a meticulous woman, careful and attentive to detail. The kind of person you want looking after things. After Estelle's passing, the family asked her to stay on to inventory Estelle's possessions. One day, Victoria was matching fabric she found in a closet with the drapes in the living room when an unusual thing happened.

"Something made me move to the dresser," she tells me, "this beautiful old dresser in the corner of the living room."

Victoria opened the drawers and took what she found—old flashbulbs, papers, photos—to the kitchen table to sort. At the bottom were a few folded papers, yellowed with age.

"I looked at the first paper," she recalls, "and I don't remember what it was. It wasn't important. But then I opened up the next one, and I just about died."

Immediately she went to Peyton's office, where she presented the paper to Peyton and Hayley Klein of the Artesia Chamber of Commerce. Peyton and Hayley, coincidentally, were meeting to plan the grand opening of the library.

The letter was the response Peter Hurd had sent to Estelle Yates back in 1952 when she'd asked for a loan of one of his paintings for a library fundraiser.

"It is a most flattering offer," Hurd wrote, "and I am extremely sorry that at present all my pictures are on exhibit in various locations."

The letter went on: "The past year I have been busy with mural commissions and have done little new work. ... I am sorry that I have nothing available that could be put up for your opening."

Though the letter didn't mention the mural by name, the dates line up.

Incredible as it may seem, the commissioned mural that prevented Hurd from offering a painting to support the old library all those years ago is very likely the same one on display in the new library today. ■

Contributor David Pike is the author of *Roadside New Mexico: A Guide to Historic Markers* (UNM Press).

DINING continued

HENRY'S BARBECUE grills its meats using only apple-wood for an authentic barbecue flavor. Briskets, pulled pork, and ribs are specialties, with homemade pie for dessert. (575) 736-1777; henrysbarbecue.com

THE ADOBE ROSE RESTAURANT serves an eclectic range of selections made with locally grown seasonal ingredients. (575) 746-6157; adoberoserestaurant.com

THE JAHVA HOUSE serves specialty coffee drinks and is a convenient place to hang out. (575) 746-9494; on Facebook

LODGING

THE HOTEL ARTESIA, located downtown, offers comfortable rooms in an understated modern style, and includes a bar with live music. (575) 746-2066; hotelartesia.com

THE HERITAGE INN BED AND BREAKFAST is housed in a grand yet cozy two-story building that dates to 1905. (575) 748-2552; artesiaheritageinn.com



Getting to the Heart of the Matter

The fates and fortunes of this rural town in the middle of NM speak volumes about the bedrock character of the state.

BY *DAVID PIKE* PHOTOS BY *STEVEN ST. JOHN*



THE SMALL TOWN OF CLAUNCH, in central New Mexico, sits amid a landscape of grassy fields and rolling hills, of windmills and barbed wire fences, of hawks tracing their signature in shadow on the ground as they ride the currents overhead. It's a beautiful if lonely land, one suited for a canvas by Andrew Wyeth, painted in grama-grass green and weathered-fence-post gray. You can sense that there was something else here before, something big. But only memories of that something homestead here now, proving up their claim in old stone foundations, tumble-down shacks, empty cisterns giving shelter to hibernating bull snakes. Along one stretch of NM 55, which stair-steps its way south from Mountainair to Claunch, a rancher has assembled a display of rusted harrows and combines in what amounts to a visual folk song about the land, with a sign reading **IN HONOR OF PINTO BEAN ERA 1900–1953**.

Every weekday and Saturday morning, a pickup truck rattles into the scene, a sojourner from the modern age.

Although the truck has the road to itself for miles in every direction, it keeps a steady 45 miles an hour on pavement, 35 on dirt, and blinks a turn signal when it pulls over, which it does every mile or so on its journey toward Claunch. Aside from the contrail of sound left by the hum of tires across the road, the only other noise is the occasional clank of mailboxes being opened and shut.

Reuben Garrison has been delivering mail on the HC-75 route between Mountainair and Claunch for 23 years, as his father did for 44 years before him, as his father's father did for six years before that—all the way back to 1942. His daily route takes him past a ramshackle house with a door rocking in the wind—the very house where he was raised. He'll also pass the abandoned one-room schoolhouse he attended as a child, the blackboard still clinging to the wall, across which the word **FAITH** has been written in pink chalk.

Meanwhile, down the road in Claunch, Reuben's imminent arrival sparks the morning ritual. The 10:35 a.m. mail delivery is not just a matter of routine, it's a social event.

The Claunch post office reflects that. Two couches rest beneath the large windows, a wood-burning stove provides warmth, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee fills the room. There's a candy jar on the table, into which someone has placed a dollar to help keep the supply stocked. The building used to be a store, but today the shelves that once held coffee and bread hold books, as the post office doubles as

the town library. Fiction is on the north wall, non-fiction on the south, and beyond that, you're just going to have to browse.

Shelly Frost is the Claunch postmaster. Which means she is also the town crier, visitor envoy, and activities director. Shelly keeps a dry-erase board on the counter with a list of upcoming events. They include the monthly visit from the Schwan's grocery man. That delivery is how Claunch residents get their frozen foods—including the most popular item ordered, vanilla ice cream—because at 40 miles away, Mountainair is outside the it-won't-melt radius. There's also a community meal and talk from a traveling preacher at the Claunch Women's Club. Welda Grider is bringing the tacos, the board says, but everyone else must supply the rest.

This is Claunch. Where the night air is so still, you can hear a train passing ten miles away. Where a sole monthly church service is sufficient to remind everyone to keep doing what they're already doing. Where a wire twisted between a latch and a nail is all you need to lock a barn door.

Bettie Fern Maples arrives at the post office to drop off mail. Bettie Fern and her family moved here when she was just a small child back in 1940. Her father leased land to farm, and Bettie Fern and her siblings helped plow the fields. Later, she moved to Alaska with her husband, but she's back now. This town has a special attraction that seems to compel people to return.

Romney Todd arrives next. Romney was once a schoolteacher, later a feed salesman, later still an employee with the New Mexico Department of Agriculture. After retiring, he told his wife, Janet, that he wanted to die on a horse, so they moved to Claunch.

Then comes Jerry Cozzen, a retired police officer, married to Bettie Fern's sister Marjorie.

After Reuben arrives and Shelly begins sorting the mail, everyone visits and chats. About breaking ice in water tanks in winter, about buying horse insurance, about spring calving, serving jury duty, the local road grader, even sleep apnea. Topping it off is a brief discussion on the oddity of being in far eastern Socorro County when the history and economy of Claunch are more closely tied to Torrance or Lincoln County.

"Three, maybe four years ago," Jerry recalls, "they were having elections here, and they ran out of ballots. So they called Socorro County and they said they'd send them out with the sheriff. After a little while, the deputy called and asked, 'How do I get there?'" »

Facing page: Built by the WPA, the Claunch School had a student body of almost 200 in its 1940s heyday. As farming declined due to drought, attendance dwindled and the school closed in the 1950s. **Previous page:** Claunch denizen Jerry Cozzen, a retired policeman.



Left: Rush hour. Below left: The Claunch Community Church is the last of five houses of worship in the town.



Outside the large post office windows, you can see most of what constitutes Claunch today. Across the street is the abandoned Spear Mercantile, which used to sell feed, clothing, and tools. Back in the thirties and forties, the post office swapped locations back and forth between that building and the current one, depending on who wanted to be postmaster. Down from that is the Claunch Community Church, the last of five churches that once existed here. People who knew Claunch in the latter years remember the singing conventions that were held in those churches, joyous occasions when all of central New Mexico came together and sang hymns. There's a school and a bean elevator, both closed now, a few homes, the Claunch Women's Club, and a cemetery adorned with solar lamps that glow like fireflies at night.

Down the highway, Billy Bob Shafer spends his days caring for the Rancho Sacate. Every other morning or so, he drives out to his east pasture to feed the heifers, honking his horn to call them, like a dinner bell, and pushing a button inside the truck cab to release feed pellets.

Billy Bob's ranch used to be called Rancho Secate. But when a friend told him that *secate* was Spanish for "dry," a dangerous name for a ranch, Billy Bob removed the letter E from the foot-high letters on his sign, cut off the prongs, and re-welded them into an A. Now the name of his spread, Rancho Sacate, means "grass ranch."

"I don't know if it's going to help," he laughs. "But it can't hurt."

If only someone had thought of that earlier. Driving across a field, Billy Bob points to a fence alongside the pasture. Several years back, he was digging a new fencepost hole there when he hit a metal wire. He dug further, only to uncover a whole other fence underneath his own, buried by dirt blown off the plowed fields that once surrounded Claunch.

The vast swaths of grassland around the town today are the descendants of those fields. In the right light, you can still see impressions of rows and rows of what had once been the cash crop here: pinto beans.

Each field tells a story, about farmers following the Homestead Act west, clearing the land of mesquite and greasewood by hand, planting bean seeds, and dryland-farming their way to a hoped-for prosperity. And in so doing, changing the very character of this part of New Mexico.

But then came the drought of the 1950s. The land got drier and drier, the times got harder and harder. Entire communities faded away. Families sold out, or

sometimes just abandoned their homesteads outright, leaving their farm equipment to rust in empty fields. A population that had peaked around 400 has dwindled to 17 today.

Some ten miles or so west of the town itself is the old Claunch House, the headquarters of what was once the large Claunch Cattle Company. It's owned now by Welda and Bill Grider.

Built in 1917 for Mr. L. H. Claunch, the town's namesake, the house was a true showcase of its time. Still is. Three bedrooms, two fireplaces, and, at one time, the only grass lawn in Claunch. On the end of the long wrap-around porch is a son-in-law room. Visiting cowboys slept there, as did Welda's father when he was courting her mother, social convention forbidding them from sleeping inside with the women.

In the kitchen today, you'll find a number of poultry-related items, like an oven mitt with a picture of a rooster and a spoon holder in the shape of a chicken. They are a tribute to Welda's grandmother, Roy Lee (an amalgam of Roy Lee's father's name, Leroy). Roy Lee was fond of chickens and kept one hen inside the house as a pet. When Roy Lee passed away, her pet hen died soon after. So Welda made a special request of the undertaker.

"I've buried cats and dogs with people," Welda recalls him responding. "I guess a chicken would be fine."

The two now rest comfortably together in a nearby cemetery.

The grand house makes an impression, as Mr. Claunch himself apparently did. He was tall, most everyone agrees, often dressed in black, a teetotaler. Friendly, certainly—he and his wife hosted ice cream socials at their house. And well liked. It was the Claunch name that prevailed in 1935 when the time came to name the community.

A year later, the Works Progress Administration did what they did best and built a school here. Every bit the archetypal WPA school building, it was all brick and cement, with enormous windows. School buses brought students from surrounding ranches to a peak attendance that reached almost 200 kids. Most of them were farm kids, and school administrators knew it.

"If you had to do the harvest at home," Bettie Fern remembers, "the school would excuse us out of high school for two or three weeks."

Bettie Fern Maples and her sister Marjorie Cozzen, along with Billy George Montgomery, gather in Bettie Fern's house one evening and remember those days.

Marjorie unfolds the quilt she was given by the Claunch Women's Club as her wedding present back in 1960. Each square is the name of a Claunch family—the Montgomerys, the Tallys, and many others. Strong and

comforting, that quilt represents not just families, not just a community, but a code of ethics: coming together to offer help, sharing when you have extra, sharing when you don't have extra. And, in return, the privilege of reaching out with every expectation that someone will take your hand.

Billy George's father homesteaded here back in 1929, making his family one of the earliest to grow beans. He was also the last: He, along with another patriarch of the town, Bill Wells, farmed the last few acres of pinto beans around Claunch, back in 1969.

"I thought at the time it was coming back," he remembers. "That you could raise something. But it didn't happen."

Though Bill Wells passed away last year, his ranch remains in the family. His son, Wendell Wells, along with Wendell's wife, Jimmie, maintain the extensive property at the north end of Claunch.

Wendell takes a break from his chores one day to drive out to visit the old house where he grew up, not far from where his grandfather originally homesteaded. Across from it is a barn that his father, Bill, built entirely from flattened metal barrels. At one time, the homesteads out here were clustered every half-mile or so, close enough that his grandfather praying outside in the evening could hear other families around him doing the same.

"Out here, your friends are your neighbors," Wendell says. "And it doesn't matter if they're two years old or 100 years old—they're your friends."

Closer to their ranch house is an older homestead Wendell's father felt sentimental toward and kept fixed up. That place has one important historical distinction: It was the site of the first phone in Claunch.

That phone, however, was outside. In a shower stall.

In the mid-1980s, Wendell's father convinced the phone company to put a jack at the side of the building. Then he found an old tin shower stall and placed it around the phone as a makeshift phone booth. One day, as a joke, someone put an old toilet inside, making the whole thing appear to be an outhouse but nonetheless creating a place to sit. Anyone making a call recorded it in the logbook, then settled with Mr. Wells when the bill came.

Wendell's family helped create the foundation of this town in a literal sense, too: His great uncle poured the concrete floor of the old Claunch bean elevator, mixing it a batch at a time in a washtub with a hoe. It wasn't level, but it would stop a pinto bean in free fall.

That old elevator still stands today along the highway in the middle of town. It's been in the Tally family

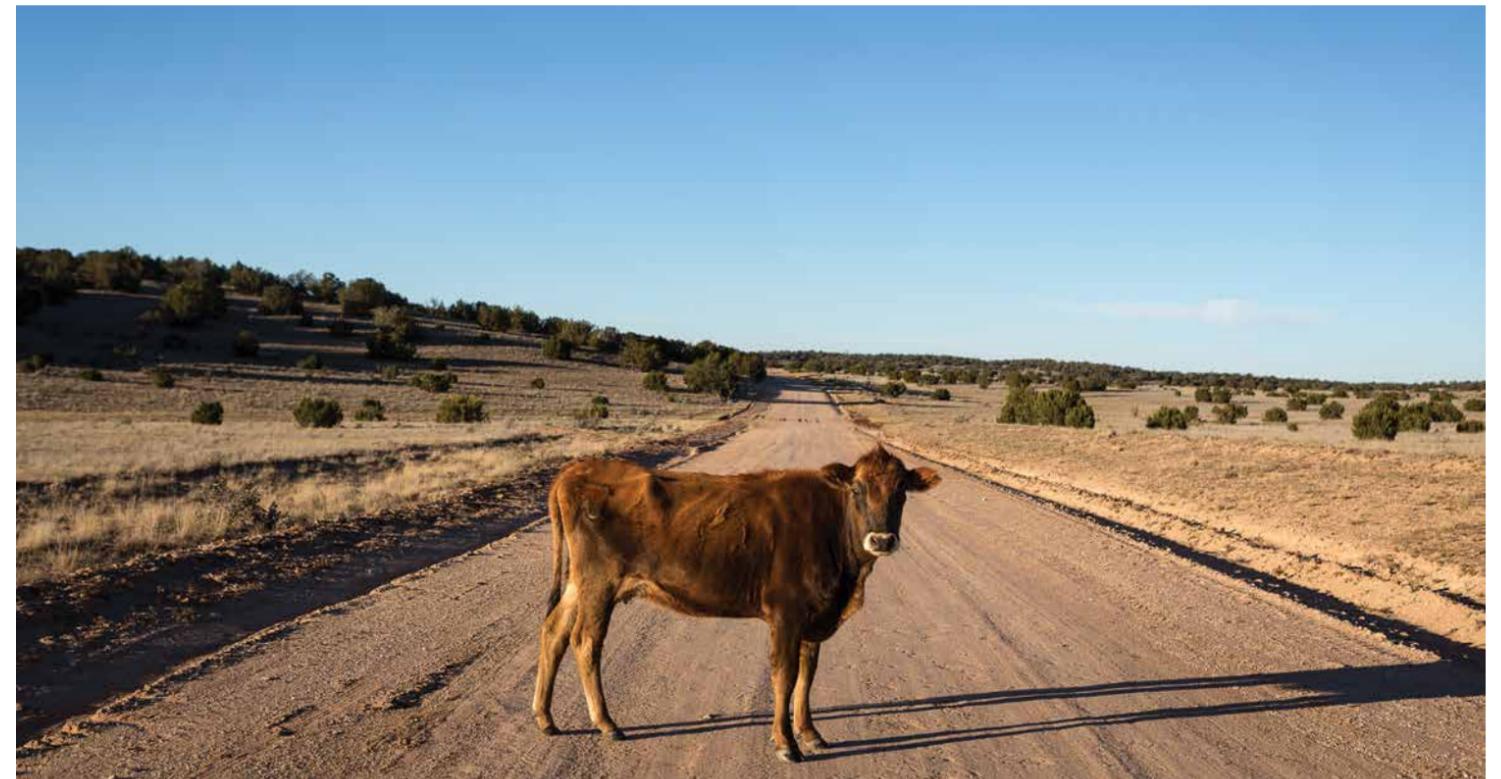
for years. Standing before the colossal metal structure one afternoon, Berlene Tally turns the key in the lock, opens the door, and sends a shaft of daylight across the interior, spotlighting something completely unexpected and entirely wonderful.

Those are words that could be used to describe Berlene herself. At one time, Berlene's family farmed some 1,200 acres of pinto beans in Claunch. She still has an old black-and-white photo showing her father on a tractor, and her and her sister, just little girls themselves, on their own tractors on either side of his. A barrel racer in her youth, Berlene later moved away, ended up in California running a gourmet cookware shop, and took ballroom dancing lessons from the man who would become her third husband, Tony Scaccia. After retiring in 1999, she, too, returned to Claunch, with Tony.

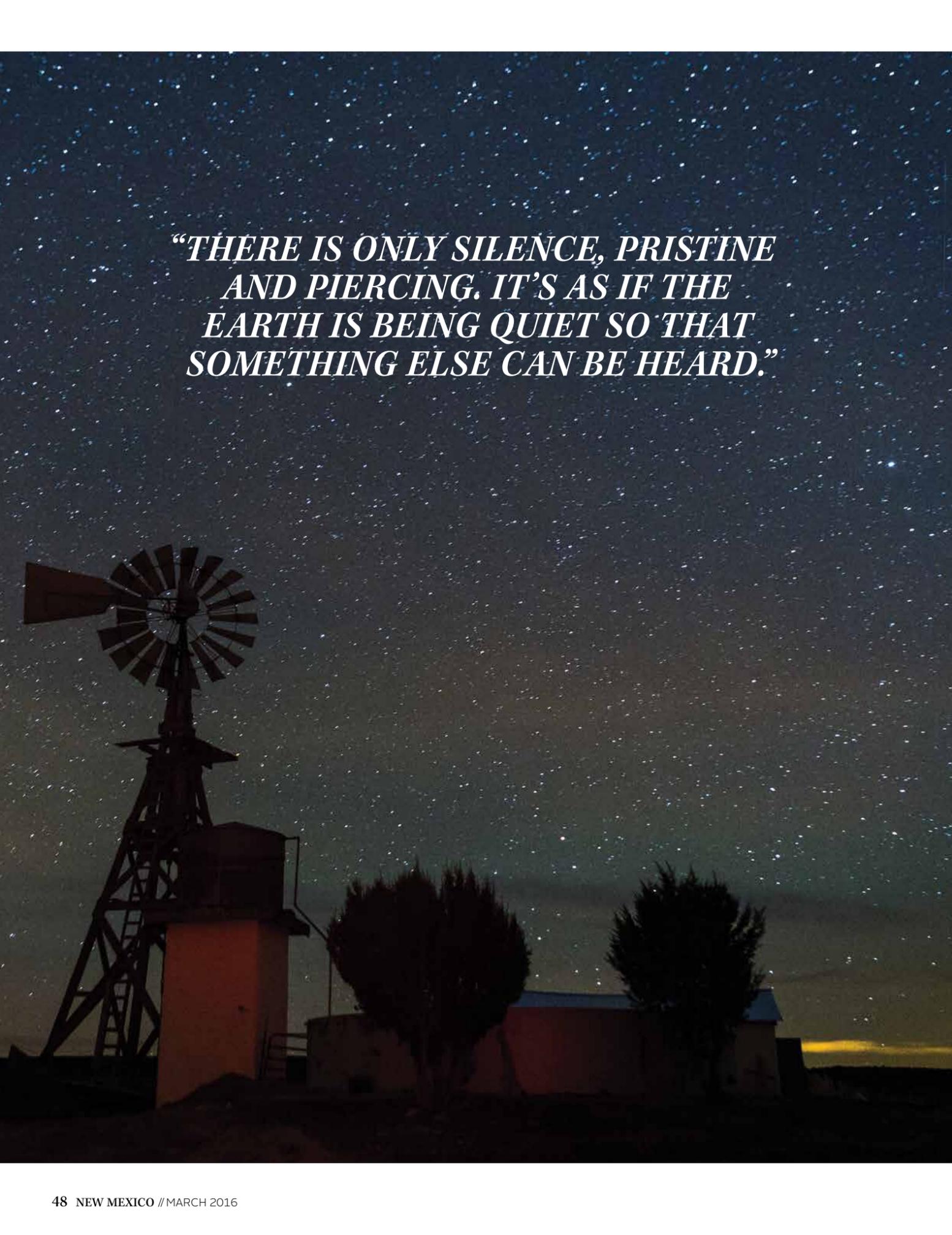
Back inside the bean elevator, Berlene uses her shoe to brush off a bit of dirt on a raised portion of flooring. Underneath that dirt is, of all things, a ballroom dance floor.

Though now deceased, Tony, Berlene's husband, left his mark here. He loved dancing, taught it, lived it. He cleaned up the old bean elevator, put up a museum of old farm equipment on the north end, and installed a dance floor on the south. The very elevator that had once cleaned and sacked pinto beans was thus reborn as a venue for reunions, *quinceañeras*, and dances.

But one particular event stands out from the rest. It happened on a late-summer evening about ten years ago. About 100 people arrived at the bean elevator that night: the Wellses, the Frosts, local ranchers and others from surrounding communities, all dressed for a night out. Tony introduced the evening's entertainment—a display of Latin dancing with his former dancing partner from California, Loucinda Carlton. A dancer and choreographer, Loucinda had met Tony when she was auditioning for a Budweiser commercial that required her to brush up on the lambada, and they quickly became friends and dance partners. Once settled in Claunch, Tony and Berlene invited Loucinda to visit them, and to perform one evening as a special presentation to the community. So, after his introduction, Tony started the music on a cassette player, and Loucinda, dressed in a black-sequined Latin dress with rhinestones and tassels, took to the floor and danced a solo. Then Tony joined her, and while the audience watched with admiration and delight, they cha-chaed, sambaed, and tangoed, elegance in motion, in this old



Facing page, top: Quirt McDaniel, a former rodeo champion, manages one of the largest ranches in Claunch. **Bottom:** Rush hour 2.



***“THERE IS ONLY SILENCE, PRISTINE
AND PIERCING. IT’S AS IF THE
EARTH IS BEING QUIET SO THAT
SOMETHING ELSE CAN BE HEARD.”***

bean elevator in the middle of New Mexico.

“It was just fabulous,” Knollene McDaniel recalls of that performance when I visit her at her ranch house south of Claunch. Her ranch has been in the family since the mid-1800s. She inherited it and moved here in 1963, when the last gasps of farming could be found, and ranching became a better use for the land.

“When we were moving in, most of the farmers were leaving out,” she remembers. “And my husband said, ‘Knollene, do they know you’re coming, and they’re all leaving?’”

Widowed now, Knollene is as tough as the land itself. She thought nothing of once confronting a trespasser while clad only in her pajamas and boots. Another time, after she was knocked to the ground by a cow and began bleeding from the head, she called Shelly at the post office for help, and, while waiting for her to arrive, snapped a photo of herself as a memento.

Then there’s the time the cows chewed through her TV cable. When she finally convinced the cable company to send someone to replace it, that young man, looking around at all the vast open land here, asked incredulously, “Why would anybody want to live here?”

Knollene’s answer came quickly: “Why wouldn’t they?”

Knollene’s grandson Quirt lives on the ranch and works it in partnership with his grandmother. Late one afternoon, Quirt—he was named for the whip—takes the truck out to look at an old *mojonera*, a rock monument left by shepherders many years ago, then past the twisted cedar tree where he married his wife, Natty, last fall. His two Louisiana Catahoula leopard dogs run alongside the truck for part of the way, until he commands them to stop, one of 26 commands he’s taught them, including opening the ranch-house door for his grandmother and loading firewood into the back of his truck with their mouths.

At 25 years old, Quirt is part of the future of this little town, the next square in the Claunch family quilt. He grew up in Claunch, and though the pinto bean farming was gone by the time he was born, he appreciates the rigor of those years. “It takes a lot of faith,” he says, “to put a bean in the ground and pray for rain every year.”

He reaches a rise on the northern edge of the ranch and gets out to admire the view. From here you can see all of Claunch. There’s the post office. There’s the bean elevator. There’s

At the far end of town is the Claunch Women’s Club. If the club building looks like an old church, that’s because it was. When membership declined, the Baptists gave it to the women of Claunch as a permanent place to meet. Since then, it has hosted monthly club meetings, pie suppers, musical get-togethers (no dancing, per the donation agreement), and lots and lots of quilting. Dues are a dollar a year.

It also hosts community events, like a visit one evening from John Fitzpatrick, an evangelist who travels the country preaching in small communities like this one. Bettie Fern and Marjorie and Jerry Cozzen are in attendance, as are Welda and Bill Grider, Shelly and Duane Frost, Romney and Janet Todd, Wendell and Jimmie Wells, and others.

After finishing his tacos, Mr. Fitzpatrick stands and speaks of forgiveness and salvation and of trusting in a higher power.

Outside, the clouds glow purple in the rays of the setting sun, and soon it is dark. The night arrives forcefully, obliterating the horizon so thoroughly that it becomes impossible to distinguish porch lights from stars. Everything is quiet. Not even a cricket ventures his love song into the darkness. There is only silence, pristine and piercing. It’s as if the earth is being quiet so that something else can be heard.

Then, just for an instant—if even that—the night becomes disorienting, even intimidating. All that vast open land, all that immenseness—it’s right there, only an arm’s length away. This close, you can feel its power. The power to test a person’s faith, to rescind at will what has been given. The power to end an era.

The light from inside the Women’s Club casts outward from the windows into the night like a solitary lighthouse on the plains. Inside, Mr. Fitzpatrick concludes his sermon with a short prayer, and everyone joins the “Amen.”

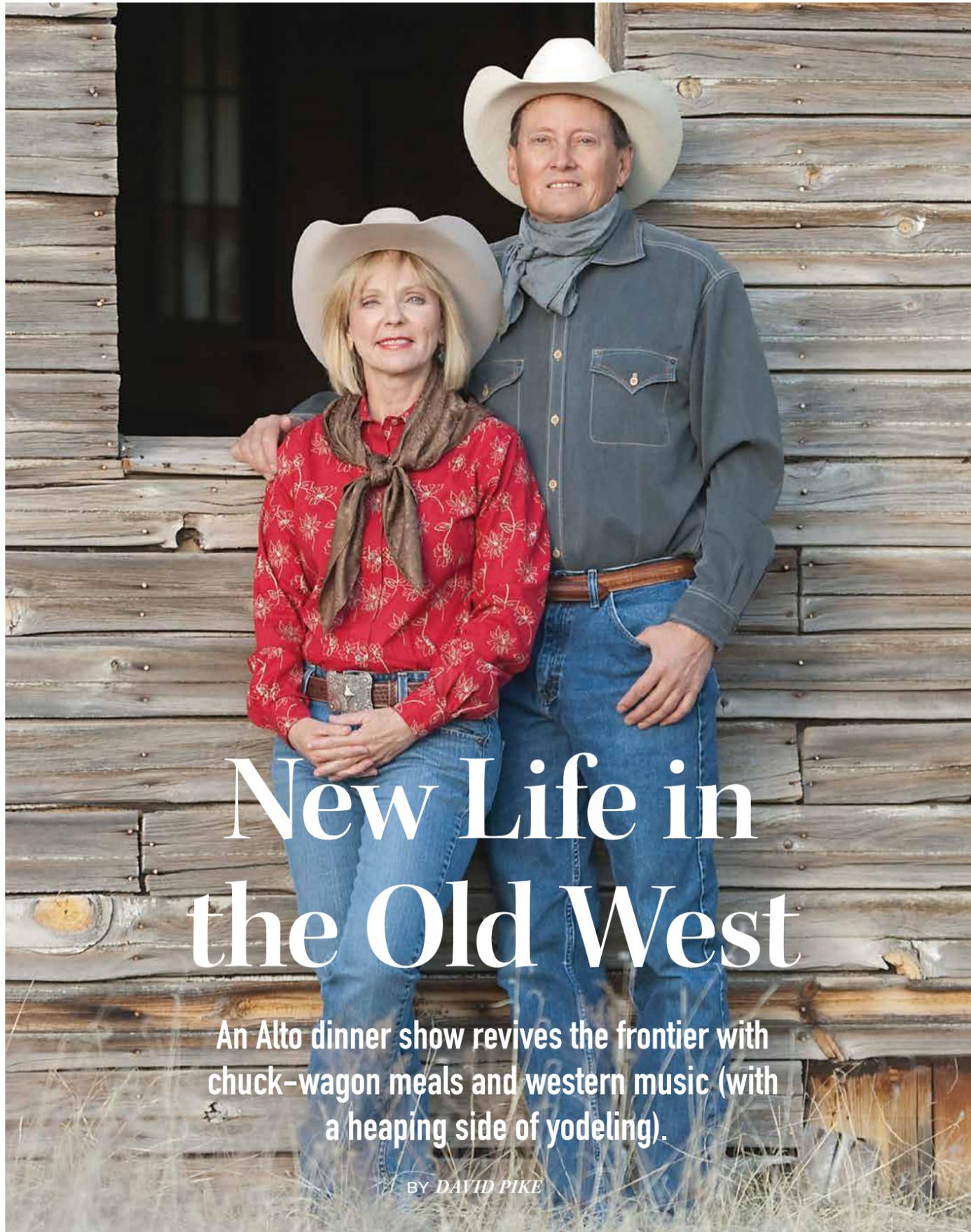
After a moment to let the message settle, someone begins clearing tables, someone else tells a joke, and conversations begin anew. Nobody is in any great hurry to depart. Soon enough, they’ll get in their pickups, wave goodbye, and drive off down the highway to home, the red blaze of their taillights being swallowed by the night. But for now, it’s safe and warm in this haven, and the company is good. The people of Claunch have found the best defense against the unknown: each other. ■

Contributor David Pike is the author of *Roadside New Mexico: A Guide to Historic Markers* (UNM Press).

Facing page: The night sky, seen from the ranch house of L. H. Claunch, who left his legacy as a place-name.

AUTHOR’S NOTE

Sadly, Knollene McDaniel passed away a few months after my visit to Claunch last year. I’m grateful that our paths crossed and know that my memory of her will long outlast our short time together. At Knollene’s remembrance service, person after person rose to speak about her strong-willed approach to life, her love for the beauty of the Claunch area, and her propensity to “cuss on you” should you upset her. “Knollene wasn’t perfect,” Welda Grider said at the service, “but she was perfectly Knollene.”



New Life in the Old West

An Alto dinner show revives the frontier with chuck-wagon meals and western music (with a heaping side of yodeling).

BY DAVID PIKE

JOSEPH ARCURE

AT ONE POINT IN THE FLYING J Wranglers' musical dinner show, sometime after "West Texas Rain" but before "Daniel Prayed," lead singer James Hobbs pauses to share a personal story. The audience, seated in the old barn that serves as the performance hall, falls silent, because they recognize it—this is their story too, whether they're from here or not. He talks about the beautiful mountains around Ruidoso, where the Flying J Ranch is located, and the devastation brought to them by the Little Bear Fire in 2012. Then, because they're musicians, the Wranglers sing about the fire and its aftermath, their voices and instruments harmonizing on an original ballad that James co-wrote with his friend Mike Kelly, "New Life in the Old West."

The song starts with a long, slow prelude on the fiddle, like a new day gently dawning, and then the words arrive, recalling the feelings of loss that the fire brought on—but also, more importantly, the hope that can be found in the green patches now sprouting from the singed forest. Ever since the first time the Wranglers performed "New Life in the Old West," people have visited with them after the show, telling them how the song touched them, perhaps because they lost something in the fire, or because they've been through a tough time recently. It's this moving blend of talented musicianship and an appreciation for the way of life in New Mexico—sometimes hard, often joyful—that lies at the heart of the Wranglers' performance. It's what brings 400 or more people here every evening, some of them so regularly that they are affectionately known as "J-Heads."

The Flying J Ranch Chuckwagon Supper and Western Show is the creation of James and Cindy Hobbs, a husband-and-wife team who founded the ranch and started and perform in the Flying J Wranglers band. James got the idea for the Flying J after working at a similar venue, the now-closed Lazy B Chuckwagon, in Estes Park, Colorado. That's also where he met Cindy, a singer from Tennessee. The couple purchased the property here in Alto back in 1982, formed the Flying J Wranglers, and turned their undeveloped plot of land into one of the most beloved western music venues in New Mexico.

I was eager to look behind the scenes of the Flying J, but I came to find out there's really no "behind" here. It's all one big scene. James, whose demeanor is as gentle as his voice, shows me around the Flying J Ranch property, which has been transformed into an Old West town they call Bonito City, a reference to a

nearby former town that carried the name. Along the bottom of a small canyon are stores with frontier-era facades, where you can buy things like beeswax candles and jewelry. There's a re-created blacksmith shop with an automaton named "Cowboy Bob" who gives a recorded talk about blacksmithing, and a large dining hall and stage known as the Old Barn Opera House. On the gentle slope just past those buildings is a small chapel among the pines. James isn't sure where the hand-carved wooden pulpit inside the chapel came from—a fan, apparently, left it one day as an anonymous donation.

"It's kind of retro," James explains of the Flying J. "It has a traditional feel to it. It's simple. And the meal and the music combined make a great reason to get together."

Visitors arrive for the evening well before the show begins, and that's OK, because the pre-show time is as much a part of the experience as the performance that will come later. Guests roam the frontier town, shop, sit and talk. Blue jays caterwaul, and a vanguard of fireflies greets the evening. The Wranglers mingle with the crowd. Roy Black, who plays bass guitar, dons a sheriff's badge and leads a junior deputy training school, during which youngsters agree to be kind to animals, study hard, and abide by the other tenets of the Flying J Ranch Junior Deputy Code of Honor. Corinna Ripple, the fiddler, and Randy Jones, who plays guitar, banjo, dobro, and steel guitar, demonstrate their instruments up close for curious onlookers. Greg Meeks, who plays harmonica and sometimes sings, answers questions about the pioneer wagon on display, then helps kids pan for gold in a trough set up for that purpose. Naturally, there's a gunfight on Main Street: James and Greg, it seems, are bad guys causing trouble in town, and Sheriff Roy is there to stop them and restore justice. Or something. It's the laughter elicited by the corniness of the show that everyone will remember, not the plotline.

The Wranglers themselves also serve the food when dinner begins. It's done "chuck wagon-style": when it's your table's turn, you line up for your helping of brisket or chicken, beans, a biscuit, a foil-wrapped "tater," applesauce, and coffee, in a tradition inspired by the traveling kitchens that have fed cowboys in cattle camps for generations. But at the Flying J Ranch, it's not so much the food preparation techniques being re-created here—the food is cooked in a kitchen, not a field wagon—but rather the sense of togetherness that chuck wagons inspire, when hungry people gather around one of the most communal devices ever invented: the dinner table. Here, those tables are elongated to accommodate several visitors,

Facing page: Cindy and James Hobbs, founders of the Flying J Ranch Chuckwagon Supper and Western Show.



Above, from left: Corinna Ripple, James Hobbs, Cindy Hobbs, Roy Black, and Randy Jones take the stage. **Facing page, clockwise from top left:** A young visitor enjoys a pony ride. Corinna Ripple offers an informal fiddle demonstration. Deputy trainees earn their stars under shady pines. Cindy Hobbs shows off a pan of “world famous” biscuits.

each person seated next to someone they may not know but with whom they will soon undoubtedly discover something in common. Just as I did with the people sitting opposite me, who, it turns out, shared some of the same friends.

The food is good to begin with, but something about the way it’s served, so simply, on the same kind of aluminum camping plate you’d find at a field chuck wagon, makes it taste even better. I find my biscuit especially tasty. (Fortunately, the Junior Deputy Code of Honor I swore to earlier doesn’t say anything about gluttony.) During dinner, the Wranglers float around making sure everyone has what they need. At least a few newcomers in the audience each evening must be surprised when the same person who just refilled their iced tea walks onto the stage moments later and picks up an instrument to play.

“That’s the secret of the whole business,” Cindy confides in me. “There’s no wall between the audience and the performers.”

As nourishing as the meal is, the music is twice so. The Wranglers play a number of instruments—guitar, fiddle, and bass—and they all sing, seasoning the music with just enough twang that you don’t forget where you are. The vocals are beautiful—pure and unadorned, as if the mountains themselves were harmonizing. For an hour, the Wranglers

sing original songs and old standards—“Ghost Riders in the Sky” is here, of course, and several others that are familiar in theme if not in melody. The lyrics speak of riding dusty trails and feeling a kinship with the land, and of all the hard work still to be done before the day is over. Even if you don’t mend fenceposts for a living, or punch anything other than a time card, the sentiments still feel relevant. Dusty trails come in many forms.

The Wranglers are true performers, each a talented musician and singer. And they’re as much fun to watch as they are to listen to. When Corinna solos on “Orange Blossom Special,” her fingers dance across the fiddle strings in a choreography that entralls. The joy the Wranglers take in performing shows on their faces.

And there’s yodeling. Oh, yes, yodeling. This is Cindy Hobbs’s forte—despite being self-taught, she won the Western Music Association’s national yodeling contest in 1990. It’s clear why. In the short three minutes it takes her to convince the audience to “Yodel Your Troubles Away,” Cindy jumps vocal registers so rapidly and often that the other Wranglers are inspired to cool her down by fanning her with their cowboy hats.

After the performance, people who weren’t friends coming in are friends going out. Many carry souvenir dinner plates they bought in the store. The Wranglers make themselves available, signing autographs and

MARK DOTH; FACING PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: JACOB ROEBUCK (3), MARK DOTH



NEED TO KNOW:

The Flying J Ranch Chuckwagon Supper and Western Show is open for the summer season from Memorial Day to Labor Day, six nights a week (closed on Sundays). The fall season runs from September to mid-October, Saturdays only. Tickets are required and reservations recommended. 1028 NM 48 N., Alto; (575) 336-4330; flyingjranch.com



answering questions. Because of the closeness they show onstage, one of the most common questions is: Are they family? They aren’t, but they still enjoy being asked.

“When people ask us that,” Greg Meeks says, “we know we’re doing something right.” ■

Contributor **David Pike** writes about small-town New Mexico. He is the author of *Roadside New Mexico: A Guide to Historic Markers* (UNM Press).



Attention!

Now celebrating its 125th anniversary, the New Mexico Military Institute stands as a Roswell enigma: a time-honed trainer of America's best and a bit of a local mystery.

BY DAVID PIKE PHOTOS BY STEVEN ST. JOHN

A formal courtyard ceremony marks completion of the 21-day Recruits at Training program. Here students are recognized for their work and receive their first privileges.



No sooner do I arrive on the campus of New Mexico Military Institute in Roswell than I'm in the way. Lieutenant Colonel Colleen Cole-Velasquez, director of communications, ushers me quickly onto the sidewalk as hundreds of cadets march past in an impressive show of pageantry and discipline. She uses her phone to broadcast live video.

"Parents love to see their kids," she tells me.

It's like a shining river, this procession, impressive to the eye and stirring to the spirit, cadets in light blue Class C uniforms marching in step, syncopated to the regimented beat of the drummers at the back of the line.

"Eyes ... *right!*" each troop commander calls as the cadets in his or her troop pass the members of the regimental staff, high-ranking cadets who lead the corps.

Everywhere else in Roswell, people are going to lunch by, well, by going to lunch. But cadets at New Mexico Military Institute, or NMMI, are making their way to the dining hall with purposeful intent. Cadets at NMMI, I learn, do everything purposefully.

That's been true since the institution was founded as the Goss Military Academy in 1891—NMMI began the year of its 125th anniversary with homecoming this October. Over those many decades, NMMI has become an integral part of the city of Roswell and the state of New Mexico. It counts among its alumni individuals like World War II Air Force pilot and Medal of Honor recipient John "Red" Morgan, artist Peter Hurd, and hotelier Conrad Hilton. Yet it remains a mystery to many, even to some in Roswell. It fights misconceptions: that it's a reform school, or a resort for rich kids, or that it's exclusively for students who want to enter the military (though many cadets here do pursue academy nominations and a military career). NMMI is, simply put, an internationally

regarded boarding school that uses military protocol to nurture around 1,000 students a year, ranging in age from 14 to 22, high school through junior college.

"It's like *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*," Cole-Velasquez tells me, referencing the well-known children's movie about a mysterious candy factory. "People ask, 'What's on the other side of that gate?' But we don't want to be a mystery."

She moves me quickly into Bates Hall to get to the food line before the rush of cadets, but it turns out that doesn't matter. Inside the mess hall, where 900 cadets are all eating at once, order prevails. I bumble my way through the line, a clumsy exception to the established protocol, but even though I'm delaying them and getting in their way, cadets stand aside to let me pass and call me "sir."

In the warm afternoon sun after lunch, Cole-Velasquez shows me around the campus, or post, as it's officially called. The yellow brick buildings, built in military Gothic style, resemble small castles. Pigeons strut across their turrets like sentinels on duty. Trees are numerous, and there's plenty of green space, which the squirrels enjoy without fear: Cadets are not allowed to walk on the grass.

We visit the library, the post office, and the museum. (On display is a football signed by former Naval Academy and Dallas Cowboys quarterback Roger Staubach, another NMMI alum.) There's a police department and an infirmary. We also visit the two-chair barbershop. On their very first day at NMMI, when new cadets are getting their first military-regulation haircut, parents will watch through the window and take photos.

That haircut is just one of the seminal events a new cadet will undergo. When cadets first arrive at NMMI, regardless of whether they're entering high school or junior college, they're known as RATs—recruits at training. Much of a RAT's time is devoted to studying the New Cadet Required Knowledge and Skills Qualification Book, a pocket-size book detailing in tiny font such things as the chain of command, bugle calls, and the established POD, or plan of the day—the schedule cadets follow daily. After 21 days, RATs "turn," or become "new cadets" for the remainder of the year, then "yearlings" for the second year, and then they finally achieve the coveted status of "old cadets."

As the lieutenant colonel and I cross the main square, Bronco Plaza, she cautions me not to step on a long black mat stretching some 20 feet across the plaza. Cadets assigned to Flame Duty will march the length of that mat when protecting the Centennial Flame, lit on special occasions.

I'll get to see that flame myself, turns out. It will be lit over the weekend for the Family Weekend and Open House.

Maybe it's the stark lines of the architecture, echoed in the creases of the uniforms the cadets wear. Maybe it's the enunciated announcements over the loudspeaker, or the snap of the flags in the wind. But everything around me—even the air itself, somehow—feels crisp and orderly. As the day progresses, I become increasingly self-conscious about the dust on my shoes, the uneven part in my hair, and the small spot of spaghetti sauce I spilled on my shirt at lunch. I resolve to do better the next day.



Facing page: Cadets roll up their sleeves at a pre-dawn breakfast before a tough day of training. **Right:** Thumbs-up is signaled to the bugle player after "retreat" is played at sunset. **Below:** Cadets leave the barracks before dawn to line up for their breakfast roll-call formation.





I am on post before sunrise the next morning because I want to see how NMMI wakes up.

Reveille blows at 6:00 every morning, and simultaneously, cadets raise two flags on post, at Lusk Hall and Luna Hall. In Hagerman Barracks, cadets file out of their rooms and into the courtyard, a grassy enclosure known as the “box.” Polished shoes clack as they descend metal stairs; leather straps snap against the sides of rifles; sabers ting as they rock in metal belt rings. With visual details lost to the gray dawn, the scene takes on an almost mythical quality: soft outlines of figures huddled together, like a gathering of medieval knights on a misty moor some morning long ago.

Cadets assemble with their troop. The troop structure is a core part of NMMI. Every cadet is assigned to a troop and will remain with it throughout his or her time here. Troops, comprising 70 to 80 cadets, are intentionally mixed, with both high school and junior college students. Cadets come from all across New Mexico and the rest of the United States and, at present, 13 countries. And they’re co-ed—females make up about 20 percent of the NMMI corps and hold almost half the leadership positions. (Their rooms, however, are accessible only to other females; males’ rooms, similarly, are off-limits to female cadets.) Troops room together, eat together, drill together, and often, as I learn during my visit, form deep friendships together.

The sound of drums arises in the distance as the NMMI band, Troop HQ, marches onto the parade ground north of the barracks. The other troops follow. This morning, cadets are holding a practice parade to prepare for the formal parade that will open Family Weekend. Troop and squad commanders watch closely and correct errors, no matter how minor: a troop flag held slightly too high, a cadet slightly out of step.

I’m allowed to watch all this from the reviewing stand, joining Lieutenant Colonel Jonathan Graff, the commandant of cadets. He tells me that the rank structure at NMMI replicates that of the U.S. Army, because it provides leadership opportunities for the cadets.

“You start out being responsible for yourself,” Graff explains as he surveys the procession before him. “But then we teach them that they’re also responsible for their buddy.”

In fact, as he scans the cadets, that’s part of what he’s noticing.

“I expect the cadets to be looking at each other and saying, ‘Hey you’re out of step. Your rifle’s not in line with the other rifles.’”

But as the band plays the service song for each branch of the armed services and cadets file past for the final review, all I see is precision and order. During my visit, I got to know three of those cadets individually.

Cadet Sergeant Major Jose Salido, 19, from Hermosillo, Mexico, is one of many cadets who have come to NMMI from the Mexican state of Sonora. (A former governor of Sonora, in fact, is an alum.) When Jose first arrived on post, what English he knew he’d learned from listening to American oldies music—but he found that the words sounded very different when they were yelled rather than sung. “I didn’t know where I was,” he recalls of his bewildered first year. But he learned both the language and the protocols and became one of three squadron sergeants major, overseeing five troops and 300 cadets. As he leads me across post one day on a tour, I notice that other cadets, seeing the “round brown” hat that gives away Jose’s position, straighten up when they see him. He calls out to one RAT who isn’t running within the box (required of RATs), though when we get closer, Jose gives him a nod of encouragement. Jose wears a saber as part of his uniform. But for special occasions, he wears a different one: the one given to him by his father, who attained the same rank in his own youth at the Army and Navy Academy, near San Diego.

Cadet Major Megan L. Byers, 20, is a member of the Mescalero Apache tribe, near Ruidoso in southern New Mexico. She didn’t plan to come to NMMI—it was her brother’s interest that compelled the family to first visit the campus. He didn’t apply, but Megan did. Only 14 years old at the time, she found it hard at first to be away from home, she tells me. But now, six years later, life at NMMI has helped her develop strong interpersonal bonds with her fellow cadets. “All of us pull different characteristics from one another,” she says. “You build a family here.” Megan feels that NMMI offers her an opportunity to carry on the spirit of her tribe and to give something back as well—she plans, after getting her master’s degree in criminal justice, to work as a police officer for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Relying in part on the confidence she developed at NMMI, Megan ran for Miss Indian World this year. During the cultural presentation of the competition, at the Gathering of Nations in Albuquerque in April, she masterfully demonstrated a traditional Apache War Dance to an audience of several hundred attendees.

Not everyone who comes to NMMI is interested in a career in the military, but many, like Cadet First Lieutenant Lucchese B. (Luke) Joyner, 20, are. Luke plans to become a member of the elite U.S. Navy Judge Advocate General’s Corps. He started at NMMI as a junior in high school and is now a sophomore in the junior college. Having been in the Naval JROTC in his home state of South Carolina, he counseled his fellow cadets through the RAT process at NMMI. “I’m not saying I wasn’t scared when I came here,” he says,



Clockwise from top: At the obstacle course, cadets offer one another hands of support and shouts of encouragement. Jose Salido, who graduated in May, stands by the campus’ “box.”

“because I was. But then I thought, ‘I can do this.’” And he did, finding that the more classes he took and the more involved he got in sports, the better able he was to manage it all—a sentiment that other cadets and officers echoed to me as well. After seeing himself grow and mature, Luke began to feel that he was part of something bigger than himself here. “And being part of something bigger than yourself,” he tells me, “makes you feel like more of a person.”

As I watch the cadets on the parade ground, I can’t help but wonder: How does it happen? How do cadets like Jose and Megan and Luke transition from bewildered RATs to the poised and confident cadets marching before me?

I find at least a partial answer in an unlikely spot: a narrow platform 60 feet off the ground.

As cadets one after another descend the rappelling tower like it’s a walk in the park, I ask Major Eric Evertson what it means for students to confront this challenge. Rather than answer himself, he defers to the cadets as they offer their own personal stories. They tell me of learning from mistakes, being mentored by their troop leaders, overcoming small but significant personal challenges—like learning to tie a square knot. But there’s something else, I sense, and I suspect it’s atop that platform.

So Major Evertson and I climb three levels of stairs and emerge where the birds fly by at eye level. Way up high, big things stand out: the Capitán Mountains to the west, the Pecos River to the east, and the green dome of the Chaves County Courthouse downtown glistening in the afternoon sun.

I’m not going to rappel—I’m not trained, and also, like, no way. But I do want to understand this challenge from the cadet’s point of view. Major Evertson has fitted me with rappelling gear and wrung the guide rope around the bracing bar on the platform. With gentle but insistent direction, he encourages me to the edge of the platform, where I place my heels just over the boundary and lean backwards into the abyss.

Whereupon the entirety of my mental faculties become devoted to cataloging all that could conceivably go wrong. A partial list: The rope could break, the tower could tip over, my harness could slip, a bird could attack.

Watching the cadets conquer this challenge, it’s clear that their teamwork empowers them. I see them check and recheck one another, share encouragement, communicate. They are, as Lieutenant Colonel Graff pointed out at the practice parade, taking responsibility for one another.

“This is the essence of leadership,” Major Evertson says as we watch the cadets at the tower. “Service to others.”

I realize that there’s only one way that I, or anyone else, can summon the willpower to go backwards down a wall. I have to trust. Stepping over that edge—learning, growing, becoming a cadet—comes not just as an act of personal bravery, but also as an expression of faith in your fellow cadets.

As I step back up onto the platform, I feel I am beginning to understand the power of this institution. But it’s Major Evertson who puts it into words for me.

“This place changes people,” he says.

Much of that change, I find, originates in the classroom.

“This is HD education,” Brigadier General Douglas Murray, the academic dean, tells me when we visit in his office. “We offer the fundamentals,” he explains, just as a television set does, “but enhanced,” like a high-definition, state-of-the-art model.

Academic standards are high, but the support network is strong. Every cadet has a one-on-one academic adviser, a leadership adviser, and access to three chaplain counselors, as well as group and peer tutoring. Cadets routinely score higher on ACT scores than the national average, and NMMI was ranked second in the country for transferability to a four-year university.

But perhaps the greatest enhancement, Murray tells me, is the fact that student placement is determined by ability, not age. It’s not uncommon for a classroom to include both high school and junior college students. The same is true with rank, awarded by the demonstration of leadership ability: It’s possible for a cadet in high school to have a higher rank than one in junior college.

“Our curriculum is founded on liberal education,” Murray says, “and developing the whole person: mind, body, and character.”

I get to see that HD education up close when, to my delight, I’m invited to Captain Lindsay Mayo Fincher’s high school English class, where students are performing a scene from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. It’s the play within a play of Pyramus and Thisbe. One cadet wears a hat decked out with yellow fur and eyes to perform the part of the lion.

“I hope I don’t have to wear this to formation,” he jokes.

The class discussion that follows, focusing on Shakespeare’s use of malapropism and inversions, moves quickly. Very quickly. Retreating to old habits, I pretend to be engrossed in note taking so I won’t be called on.

I also get to see the HD education in action in the community. Under the leadership of Superintendent Major General Jerry Grizzle, NMMI has emphasized



Clockwise from top: Megan Byers receives good wishes for her future after graduating in May. Cadets stand arm in arm. Climbing the ropes on the obstacle course. Watching a video before reveille.

its connection to the city of Roswell. A member of the staff is involved in every civic club in town, and many student events and facility spaces are open to the public.

"You can't distance yourself from the community," Grizzle tells me. "We're too much of an integral part."

Which explains the line of kids in a hallway of Del Norte Elementary School one evening, all waiting for their turn to be engulfed by a giant bubble.

It's Science Night, and some 50 NMMI cadets have set up experiments for the kids. I explore the classrooms, where desks and blackboards have become backdrops to static energy balls and magnets—more than 30 experiments in all. And meanwhile, in the hallway, the line of young scientists eager to explore the physics of bubble formation grows longer, each kid giggling as cadets lift a giant detergent bubble ring around them.

"It's the best night of the year," Principal Andrea Edmonson tells me.

stay on post late one day because I want to see how NMMI goes to sleep.

In the late afternoon, the football team practices on the parade ground. Members of the JROTC and ROTC get instruction in completing the grueling 26-mile Bataan Memorial Death March. The Goss Rifle Team hone their skills by flipping their rifles into the air and snatching them deftly on their descent. As required, new cadets crossing Bronco Plaza square every corner sharply—it's a kinetic metaphor, teaching them not to "cut corners."

There's a stillness in the air. And a sense that the stillness has been earned: a quiet reward for a hard day's work.

At 18:00, the bugle plays retreat, and every cadet pauses while the two flags on post are lowered.

Afterwards, in their rooms, cadets prepare for the inspection that will take place the next morning, when Squadron Sergeant Major Jose Salido and others will ensure their rooms are "to standard." Jose will run a finger over the top of the door, looking for dust, point out a pillow that's facing the wrong direction, ensure that the books in the bookcase and the bottles in the medicine cabinet are lined up tallest to shortest, and—if all is in order—pronounce it "good" and move to the next room.

Around 21:50, the sun having set and the campus swaddled in darkness, Cadet Julian Brown, 21, enters the Hagerman guard box with his trumpet. At 21:55, he lifts the receiver on the phone next to the desk, dials 00 to initiate a post-wide announcement, then trumpets the call to quarters into the receiver, the sound echoing through loudspeakers all across the post. All cadets must be in their rooms. Five minutes later, at 22:00 exactly, Julian turns out the light in a show of respect, places the phone on

the desk once again, and brings the day to a close with the mournful sound of taps.

Lights go out in the barracks, and the post is quiet.

As I walk to the parade ground for the Saturday morning parade, I know it would be faster for me to cut across the grass. I can't bring myself to do it.

Family members and friends take seats on the bleachers. The band begins to play, and the cadets march out, while everyone in the bleachers lifts a camera simultaneously. As the troops march past the reviewing stand—"Eyes ... *right!*"—the show of precision and order is rousing.

After the parade, cadets assemble in the Hagerman box as family members look on. Today is a special day, not only because families are here, but also because it's the day when cadets who have completed their time as RATs will turn and become New Cadets. A roll call of their names is read over the loudspeaker, then Lieutenant Colonel Graff congratulates the cadets. They respond with a deep-barreled "*Hooah!*" The formation ends, and cadets mingle with their families as they laugh and yell to one another. Most do, anyway. A few are doing push-ups to work off a morning demerit.

As I cross Bronco Plaza one last time, the wind lashes the Centennial Flame into a frenzied dance. A sole cadet in dress uniform is on Flame Guard duty. Behind her, the box echoes with laughter, but she stands stoically, her shoulders squared, one hand at her side, the other holding her rifle, eyes focused unwaveringly straight ahead. Then she turns, shifts her rifle to her other shoulder, and marches across the mat to a position on the other side. She'll repeat this, back and forth, like clockwork. So fluid, so precise, so singular in intent, every movement, every bend of her arm, every turn of her head executed as if it were part of a ritual that began when the very first spark ignited the very first flame and will continue for eternity. The effect is everything it should be: awe-inspiring, poignant, haunting, comforting.

This cadet—to whom the most important responsibility on post has been entrusted—she is all cadets. She, like her companions, can rappel down a 60-foot wall, quote Shakespeare, march 26 miles in the desert heat, command a squadron of her peers, and laugh with friends who become her family away from home. And when the occasion calls for it, she can summon the commitment to stand in solidarity with tradition, duty-bound, offering her personal sacrifice in the pursuit of the greater good. She is the embodiment of a spirit 125 years in the making. ■

Contributor **David Pike** writes about small-town New Mexico. He is the author of *Roadside New Mexico: A Guide to Historic Markers* (UNM Press).

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