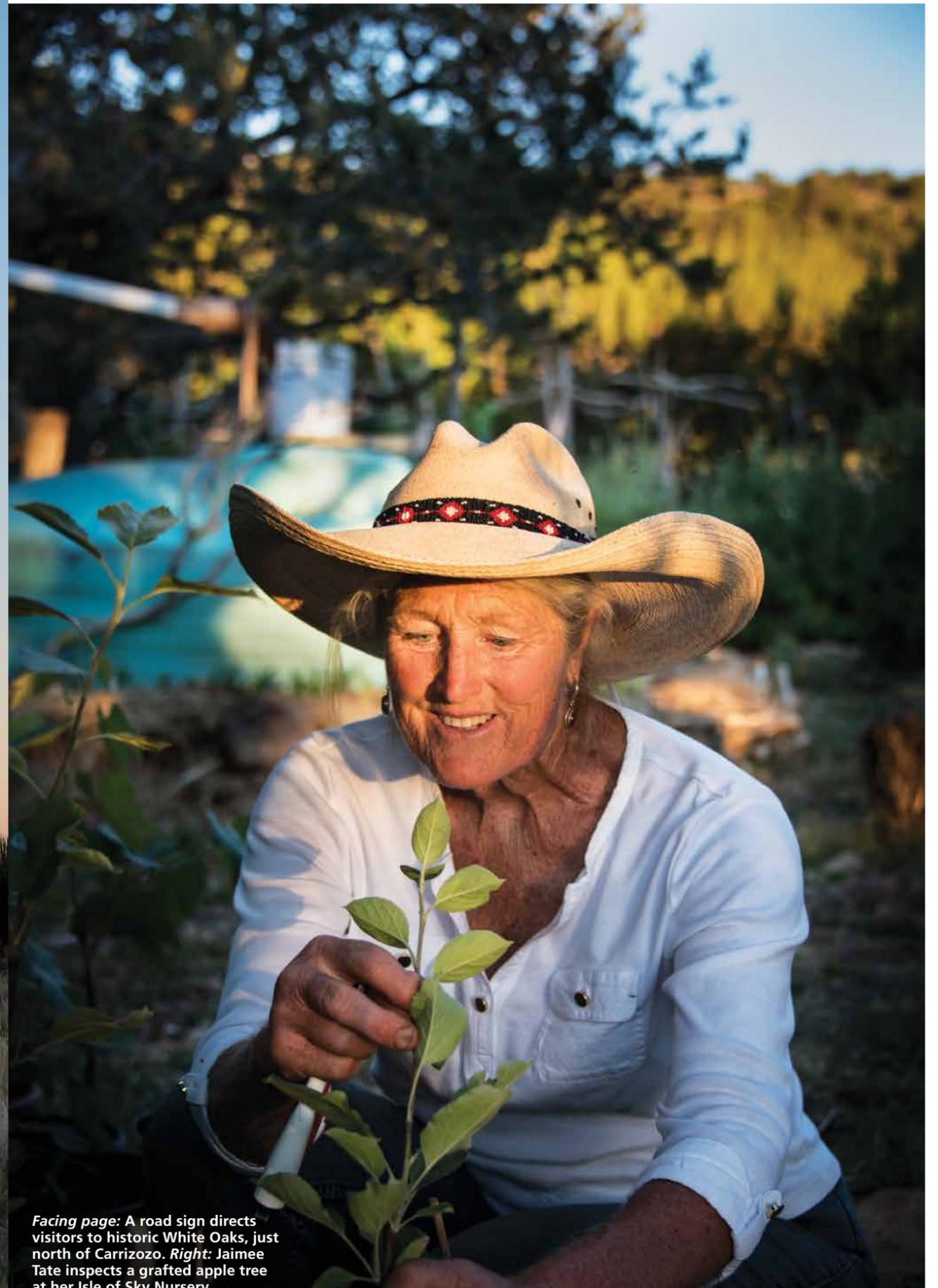


Not Fade Away

The town of White Oaks could have gone bust along with its mines. Instead, it welcomed a random assortment of outsiders, artists, and entrepreneurs who treasure a place called home.



Facing page: A road sign directs visitors to historic White Oaks, just north of Carrizozo. *Right:* Jaimee Tate inspects a grafted apple tree at her Isle of Sky Nursery.

WHEN IT RAINS IN WHITE OAKS, the sky glows with color and light and seems almost to flutter in the wind, like a crazy quilt of blue and gray and purple patches flapping high overhead. The cumulus clouds that had been home-steading through the morning scatter as rain clouds overtake them, and all around, the air sweetens with the pungent scents of wet earth and juniper trees. A clap of thunder sends birds scurrying for cover. Then sheets of rain crest the mountains that surround the town: Patos and Lone to the east and north, Baxter to the west, and the Carrizos to the south. Raindrops fall heavy on the Brown Store, where Karen Haughness keeps treasures from the past, strike the red wooden barn at the old Paden place, where David Thomas stables his horses, congregate in puddles on the dirt road leading to Ivy Heymann's gallery. They bead on the roses and strawberries out at Jaimee Tate's nursery, drum the tin roof of the firehouse where Chief Roy Dosé listens for a callout on the scanner, and splash through the downspout at the House of Memories Echoes mining museum into a metal garbage can underneath, a makeshift cistern from which they will be drawn in order to water the irises out front.

At the cemetery, raindrops drip from the iron letters above the gate that spell out CEDARVALE and fall across the gravestones of the people who built this community about 12 miles northeast of Carrizozo. John Winters and his partner staked the first gold claim on Baxter Mountain back in 1879 and set off the rush that led to the development of the town. He died soon thereafter, in 1881, and asked to be buried facing north, toward the mountain, so he could keep an eye on his claim. John Ah Nue (1847–1937), a Chinese-born resident, made his living running a hotel, doing laundry, preparing meals for the miners, and selling songbirds. When Ah Nue passed away, the story goes, the townspeople thought his wooden coffin too barren, so someone cut the felt from an old pool table and used it to line the inside. David Jackson (1870–1963) was one of the few African American residents, a self-educated man who worked the stamp mill and later became a partner in one of the mine operations. He cared for the sick in town just as tenderly as he cared for the heavy equipment after the mines closed, in hopes they all would recover. He was so beloved that the town celebrates him annually with “David Jackson Day.” Under one shared tombstone with the date March 9, 1895, eight men are buried side by side, their names listed under the heartbreaking epitaph DIED BY SUFFOCATION IN OLD ABE MINE. Life was not easy in those days. Neither was death.

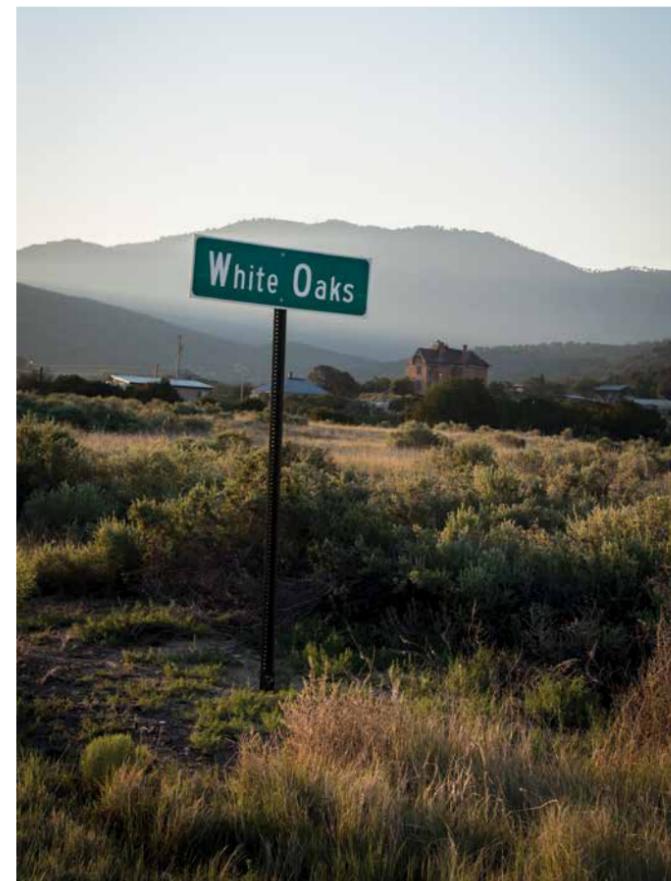
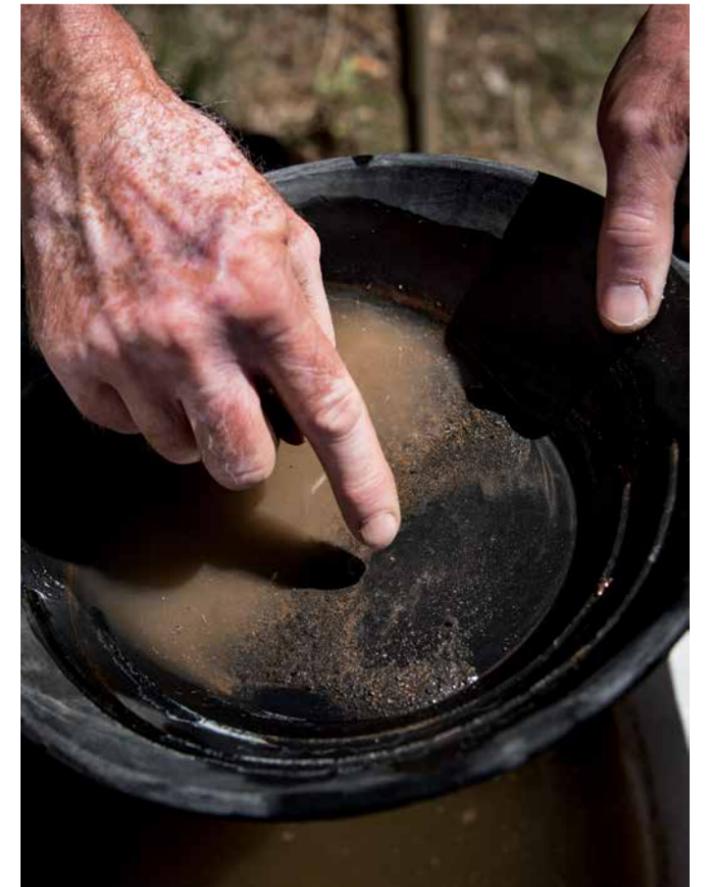
The rain falls gently over the town, and I watch it from the schoolhouse porch, where I've taken shelter during this stormy interlude in my visit. No longer in use as a school, the schoolhouse now serves as a museum.

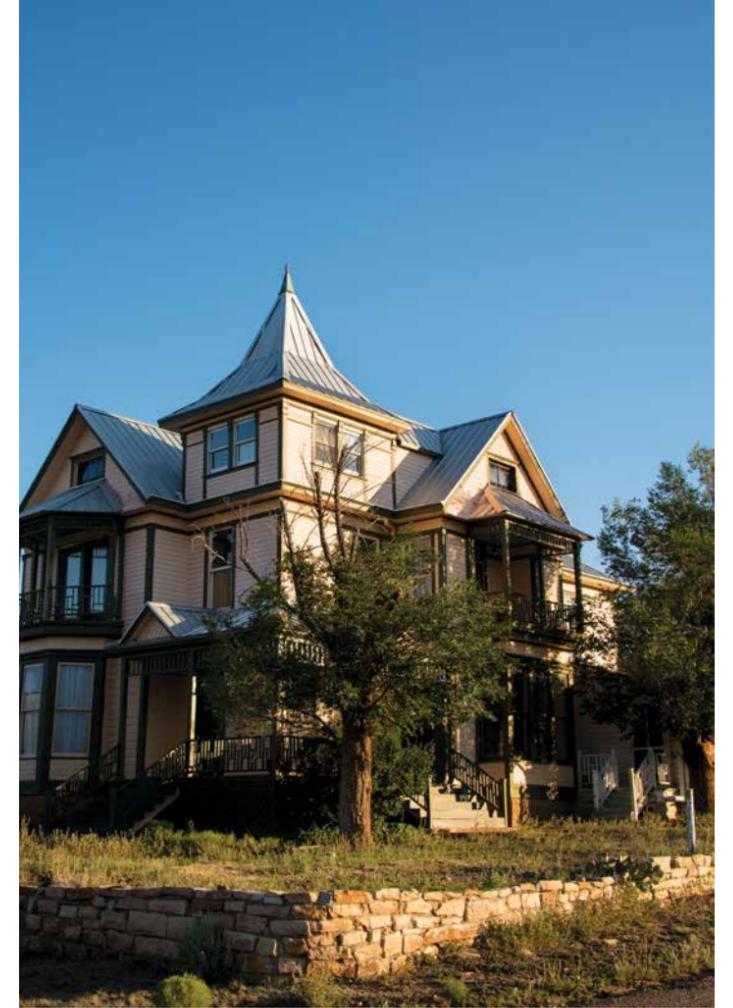
It's a grand place, two classrooms on the upper level and two on the lower. As you walk the old wooden floors, the building sings its history with every step. You can still feel the kids here, getting the classrooms ready in the morning—the girls dusting, the boys hauling coal for the stove. They're here physically, too, in a way, their names scratched into the wood of the original school desks. Claude Hobbs, unlike J.A. and H.T., chose to memorialize his presence with his entire name. In his later years, Claude came to the schoolhouse on weekends and told visitors about the time as a boy when he and his younger sister and brother escaped from a mountain lion by wading into a dirt water tank up to their necks.

Most people who know about White Oaks these days likely know it for the No Scum Allowed Saloon—and many of them get to it via motorcycle. The 1880 building was first an attorney's office, then a print shop where one of the town's early newspapers was published. For several years in the early 1980s, the bar was run on the honor system: Patrons would fetch the key from under a rock, get a drink, leave their money, and lock up. On a mirror at the end of the counter, someone has placed an old-time image of a man's face, wearing jacket and tie. Today's patrons are more likely to sport denim, tattoos, and leathers.

Some people might know White Oaks for the elegant Victorian house on the hill above the school, especially if they favor ghost-town books. It's a private residence now, and the owner, Anne New, takes care to maintain the historical integrity of the property—she's been repainting the wooden exterior to replicate the original

Facing page, clockwise from top left: The Brown Store is one of the oldest commercial structures in town. Ed McWilliams demonstrates gold panning. Ranger, the town dog, enters White Oaks Community Church during a Saturday farmers' market. A view of White Oaks (pop. 23) and the historic Hoyle House.





Above, from left: Cedarvale Cemetery and the Victorian-style Gumm House.

cedar color with dark green on the trim, and doing the same inside based on the palette she uncovered under layers of wallpaper. It's still called the Gumm House, even though the Gumm family, who owned the sawmill and built the school, left long ago. That happens in White Oaks: Buildings keep their original names. There's the Brown Store and the Taylor house, after Bob Taylor, the blacksmith. And Dr. Paden's place. The people are gone, but their names remain.

In a town that wears its history on a well-worn sleeve, the past and the present commingle so effectively that it can sometimes be hard to tell one from the other. As I got to know the people who live here today, some 20 or so in the town itself, with more in the outlying ranches and settlements, I sensed a true respect for the past, for the town itself, and for the hardiness required (then and now) to live here. "You have to know how to fix a tractor with a paper clip," Anne New summarized for me. It wouldn't have been unusual years ago to see David Jackson walking the town, bringing hot chicken soup to the sick. Just as it's not unusual today to see Ed McWilliams raising the flags at the Veterans Memorial every weekend morning, volunteering with the fire department, organizing the summer farmers' market. It's as if the very spirit of the town has been passed down from its forebears, inherited, from era to era, by pioneers and newcomers alike.

As I'm thinking all this, the clouds recede, and shards of blue sky return. I glance to the east, and there: a rainbow, ending mere feet from the schoolhouse.

In this case, the legend is true. While there may not be any gold left here, after spending time with the people of White Oaks, I can attest that there is plenty of treasure.

"That drive coming in," Grady Stewart says of eight-mile NM 349, which leads into White Oaks from US 54. "It's like the town is reaching out to embrace you."

Grady, a former owner of the No Scum Allowed Saloon, is one of the elders at the nondenominational White Oaks Community Church, where we meet one day to visit, along with Susan Gerke, a docent at the schoolhouse who manages the small House of Memories Echoes museum. The church itself is a TuffShed building you pass just as you drive into town. They hold services at 11 a.m. every Sunday. If nobody is available to lead the service, they mostly sing.

Grady and Susan walk me through the history of the town. The gold strike in 1879 led to a boom that lasted about two decades. The town that developed took its name from the oak trees that grew near the springs up the canyon. There might have been 1,200

or so people here in the good years. Some of them enjoyed the casino, some preferred the opera house, and in that sense, I suppose, it was like any other town. But White Oaks was in the right place at the right time to be tinged with epicness: Billy the Kid stopped by on occasion, and the cemetery holds the graves of Deputy James Bell, killed by the Kid at the Lincoln County Courthouse in 1881, and Susan McSween Barber, wife of Alexander McSween, a key figure in the Lincoln County War. Susan took over the ranch operation after her husband's death and became known as the Cattle Queen of New Mexico. But when the railroad chose a route that bypassed White Oaks, hope alone couldn't sustain the boom. Over time, many of the original buildings were moved or salvaged. Even their purpose was repurposed: Residents would drive their cars into the abandoned Methodist church so they could work on them out of the wind.

And yet, White Oaks still has an allure. There's a reason people choose to live here. Leaving California for a new life in New Mexico, Susan Gerke tells me, she and her husband visited White Oaks in 2005. At one patch of juniper-covered land, they got out of their car, walked around, then looked at each other and said, "We found it."

Grady, a former trucker, moved to White Oaks with

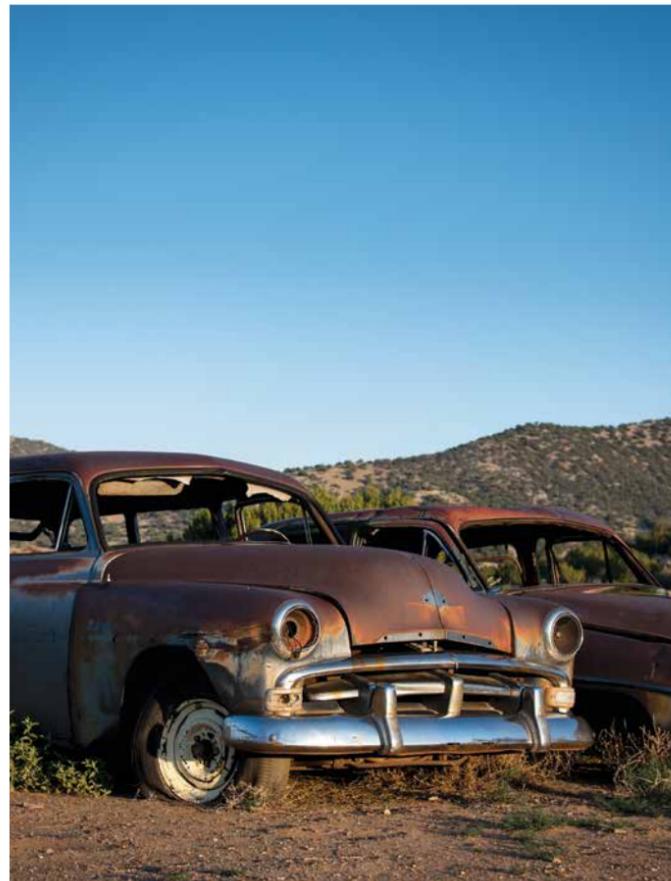
his wife in 1992. In no other place that he's lived has he felt a stronger connection. "I was coming up the road," he remembers of a day years ago, returning to White Oaks after a trip, "and I felt like I was going home."

I share my rainbow story with Karen Haughness when we visit at the Brown Store. But when it comes to rainbow stories, she has me beat. Driving into White Oaks one day, Karen saw a rainbow ahead on the road. She expected it to move as she got closer, she tells me, but it didn't, and so she slowed down—thinking, "No one's going to believe this"—and drove right through it.

"The outside of the rainbow was a mustard yellow," she recalls, "and then it was like prism colors. It was phenomenal."

Karen owns the Brown Store, one of the oldest commercial structures in town, infused with that weathered stillness so often found in buildings like this. Ah Nue ran it as a boarding house, and later it became a general mercantile operated by the Brown family. Although the Browns have been gone from White Oaks for years, Karen keeps the name to honor them.

"The dust here is free," Karen jokes as we walk around. Antique ore carts, a stove that was once used in a caboose, old rodeo programs from the 1930s and 1940s. In jars on the counter, Karen keeps authenti-



cally old-fashioned gumballs and candies, which she began to stock when visitors kept stopping by and asking for them. Turns out, they'd just been to the schoolhouse museum and heard Claude Hobbs' stories about mountain lions, and he'd sent them down here to buy gumballs like he used to get from Mrs. Brown.

"Is everything in here for sale?" I ask.

"Just about," Karen answers. "Unless I get attached."

A warm breeze blows through the open front door as Karen shows me the store ledger from 1891. We leaf through it, and I feel moved, almost haunted, by the entries. Scribbles in ink on a page left over a century ago, the insignificant act of buying a pair of silk gloves, preserved forever. Every transaction the epitaph of a bygone moment.

asked, but I sense that David is one for whom the inverse rule of humility applies: The more merit you achieve, the less you talk about it.

Instead, he shares a story about how the community supported him. Years ago, he was responding to a report of a disturbance at a hunting camp in the mountains, when a truck pulled up with three men inside. David was concerned at first, only to find that the men were locals who had heard on the scanner that he was on call in a remote area and had come to make sure he was okay.

"That's representative of the way people are up here," David tells me. "People look out for each other."

Through the window, I spy one of David's horses in the yard, a 33-year-old mare that he's had since she

"You should see the sparkle on the trees after it rains. How do you express that in words, when there's Christmas lights over every little pine needle?"

Just down the road is the old Paden place, built around 1885, where David Thomas now lives. David keeps a photo of Dr. Paden, once the primary physician in White Oaks, on the wall in his living room, where we visit. I remark how photos are like messages from the past, which reminds David of the ancient paintings in the Chauvet Cave in France, and how the artist crafted them in such a way that the flicker of the flame brought them to life, making the horses dance on the wall.

David shows me another photo. This one is him, age 18, right after he was hired by the Alamogordo Police Department back in 1980. For a couple of years thereafter, David was the youngest police officer in New Mexico. "Opie Taylor in a police uniform," he says, referencing the young character in *The Andy Griffith Show*. If the uniform is slightly too big, you'd still search in vain for someone better suited to wear it.

Framed on David's wall are a series of commendation bars earned over his 35 years of service—17 in Alamogordo and the remainder with the Lincoln County Sheriff's Department, from which he retired a few years ago as a sergeant. David once delivered a baby in the back seat of a car and pulled a man to safety from a fire. He spent years settling disputes in outlying rural areas, using patience and goodwill. In so doing, he became a respected member of the community—often, people in trouble called him at his house rather than at the sheriff's office. He'd probably give me more examples if I

was only 18 months. Her name is Bubbles, on account of her personality. We go outside to see her, and true to her reputation, Bubbles responds warmly to my strokes. David opens the barn door and lets out two other horses, Max and Champ, and the trio gallops into the open area beside the house. Streaks of sunlight through the clouds flicker on the field like flames against a cave wall, shining on the animals as they romp playfully, dancing.

East of David Thomas' house, the road splits in a Y. If you go left, you'll reach Ivy Heymann's place. If you go right, you'll get to meet Jaimee Tate.

I go left first, to Ivy's White Oaks Pottery. The dirt road is muddy from the rain, but Ed McWilliams told me earlier he'd keep an eye out for me and pull me free if I got stuck. Thus emboldened, I bump my way onward until I reach the studio and gallery and a painted sign reading PLEASE HONK. Even out here, Ivy averages a visitor a day. When you're as good at what you do as Ivy is, people will come to you.

"You should see the sparkle on the trees after it rains," she tells me as we visit in her studio and admire the view out her window. "I just go nuts for that. How do you express that in words, when there's Christmas lights over every little pine needle?"

Ivy ended up in New Mexico in the 1970s after a couple of detours on a trip to see a friend in California. She visited nearby Ruidoso, woke up her first morning there,

Facing page, clockwise from top left: The grave of Deputy James Bell, killed by Billy the Kid at the Lincoln County Courthouse, in the Cedarvale Cemetery. Singer-songwriter Tanner Houston gets people dancing at the No Scum Allowed Saloon. Old cars behind the Brown Store. The showroom at Ivy Heymann's White Oaks Pottery.

thought the smell of the pines was incredible, and got a job with the only potter in town. When that ended in 1976, she camped out on land in White Oaks while looking for good dirt for a garden. Sizing up the beauty of the area, she thought, “I could spend the rest of my life here.”

Ivy shows me around the place that she and her friends built: her glaze room, her bisque kiln, and, in the back room, a 40-cubic-foot, 2,400-degree, propane-fired downdraft kiln that she calls “Big Beasty.” On her studio shelves are raw bisques ready for glazing: sleek plates, lightweight mugs, serving bowls that will soon be alive with turquoises, teals, a strip of blue, what Ivy calls a “medley.” There’s also a clipboard with order forms from around the world.

It’s gotten colder out, and Ivy won’t let me leave without lending me her jacket. I’m worried how I’ll get it back to her, but the community will take care of that.

“Leave it anywhere,” she tells me, “and it will make its way back to me.”

I return to the Y, turn left, and travel down the road a mile to the Isle of Sky Nursery.

There are plenty of trees and plants at Jaimee Tate’s business, but no computer programs or hefty gardening tomes. Jaimee’s instincts guide her. “I listen to what the plants say,” she tells me as we stroll through her garden, past the Caroline raspberry and the irises and the quince. “Once you quit trying to make rules for things,” she says, “you’ll do okay.”

Jaimee came to White Oaks in 2001, landscaped a garden along the road to White Oaks Canyon, and built a nursery. She’s off the grid, but that doesn’t stop her from growing peaches, apricots, pears, 23 varieties of tomatoes, and 100 varieties of apples, specializing in heirloom dwarf trees—including many that aren’t well known but should be, for their delightful names alone, like Sheepnose Gilliflower and Grizzley Shockley and Yellow Newtown Pippin (George Washington’s favorite apple, Jaimee tells me).

What’s amazing about many of those trees is that they are, in a sense, rescues. Jaimee is a horticultural detective, sleuthing in ghost towns and abandoned homesteads around New Mexico, places where families once lived and worked—and planted fruit trees. Those trees are clues, she feels, revealing insights about where our ancestors came from, why they settled where they did, and even how they lived. Sometimes she’ll get requests to clone a tree that has been in a family for generations. When the descendants taste the fruit from their new tree, every delicious bite is the flavor of a childhood memory recalled.

“I think the way to keep the family tree alive,” she says, “is through the family tree.”

Jaimee shows me one special tree and tells me its story. For several years, she kept her eye on a wild

seedling she saw while riding horseback up White Oaks Canyon. Last year, for the first time, it bore apples. Jaimee grabbed three—one for herself, one for her riding companion, and one for her patient horse—and they tasted them: crunchy, sweet, juicy, with a flowery fragrance. What’s more, it was a completely new apple, having crossbred here and come up from a seed likely deposited by a bird.

“The tree looked like nothing special for many years,” Jaimee recalls. “Then it expressed itself as something magical.”

She named it the *White Oaks Cinderella*.

The bird could have flown anywhere. The seed could have fallen onto rocks. Jaimee could have explored a different canyon. But, like so many things in this town, that random drop of a seed turned into a tree that figured out how to thrive, and bore its fruit for the one person who knew what to do with it. In White Oaks, it, too, found a home. ■

David Pike was honored as 2016 Writer of the Year by the International Regional Magazine Association for his articles in *New Mexico Magazine*.

A White Oaks Ramble

TURN EAST OFF US 54 ABOUT 4 MILES N OF CARRIZOZO. TAKE NM 349 ANOTHER 7.7 MILES TO WHITE OAKS, WHERE DAY-TRIPPERS CAN ENJOY:

The **Schoolhouse Museum**. Open Saturdays, 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., or by appointment. On Schoolhouse Road, just north of White Oaks Road; (575) 648-2128 or (575) 648-2995

The **House of Memories Echoes** museum, also known as the **Miner’s Home and Toolshed Museum**. Open daily, dawn to dusk, or by appointment. On the main road, with a sign and parking area; (575) 648-2995

The **Brown Store**. A two-story stone building open most weekends through the summer, or by appointment. 925 White Oaks Road; (575) 921-1886 or (575) 648-4284; on Facebook

No Scum Allowed Saloon. Open Thursday–Sunday. 933 White Oaks Road; (575) 648-5583; on Facebook

White Oaks Pottery is about three miles northeast of White Oaks; follow the yellow-and-purple signs. Open daily, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. 445 Jicarilla Road; (575) 648-2985; whiteoakspottery.com

Isle of Sky Nursery is about a mile outside White Oaks on a dirt road. Open April–November, Thursday–Saturday, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., or by appointment. 174

White Oaks Canyon Road; (575) 648-4015; isleofskynursery.com

The **White Oaks Farmers’ Market** offers produce, baked goods, handmade soaps, jewelry, pottery, and other items from June to mid-October, Saturdays, 9:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m., at the White Oaks Community Church.

Take note: Kindly respect the privacy of residents—historic homes are still *homes*.

Where to stay and eat: Head for nearby Carrizozo and pop into the **Tularosa Basin Gallery of Photography**, which represents winners of the *New Mexico Magazine* Photo Contest. 401 12th St.; (575) 937-1489; photozozo.org

12th Street Coffee is a must-stop for the caffeine-deprived. 410 12th St.; (575) 648-4299; on Facebook

Four Winds Restaurant has a varied menu and a very hot bowl of green chile stew. 101 Central Ave.; (575) 648-2964

Rainbow Inn has a friendly staff and free Wi-Fi. 103 Central Ave.; (575) 648-4006

Four Winds Motel is quiet, with clean and comfortable rooms. 6539 US 380; (888) 314-8698



Ivy Heymann at her White Oaks Pottery studio with a view.