

Los Luceros

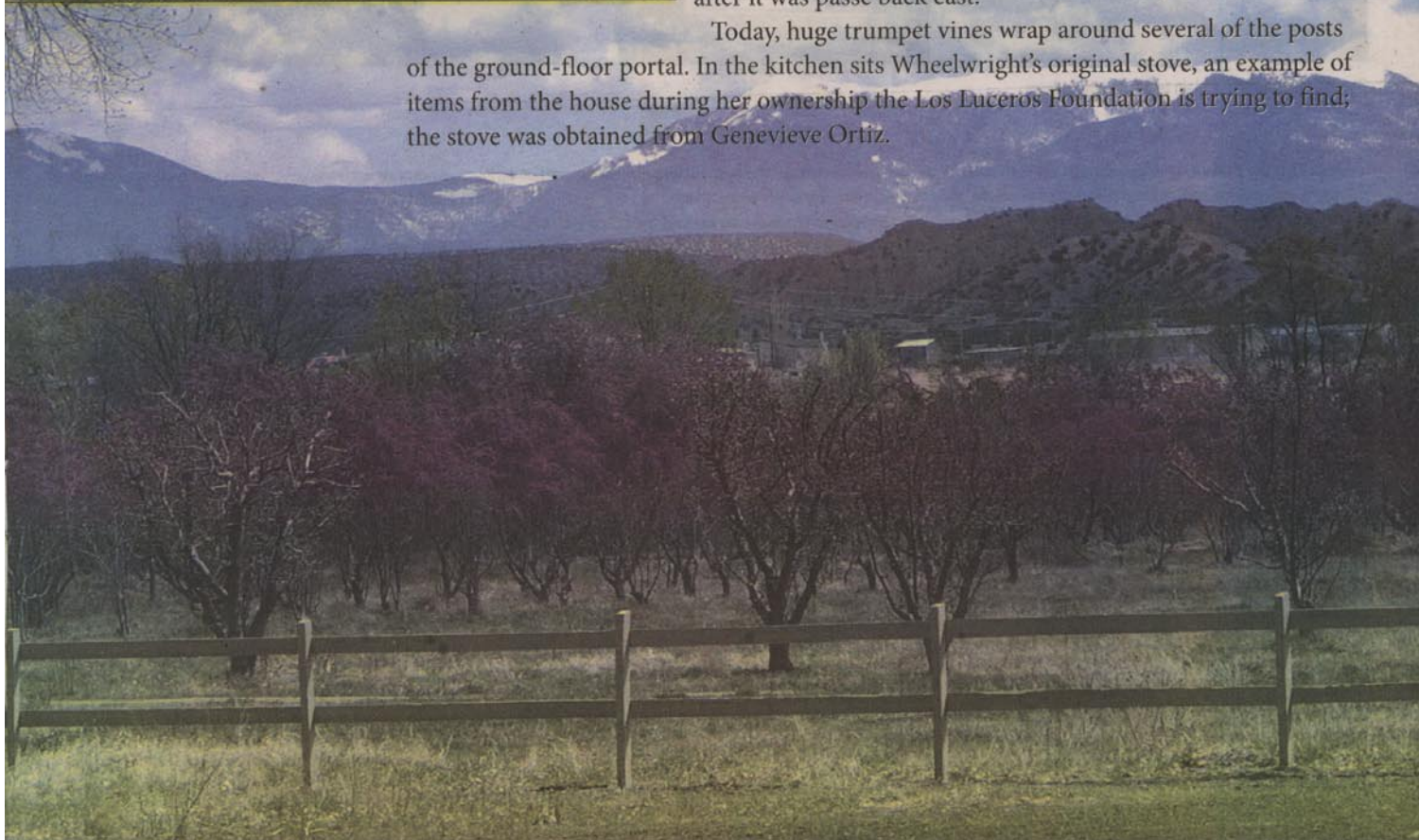
Story by Paul Weideman • Photography by Ryannan Bryer de Hickman

On Memorial Day weekend the beautiful, old home at Los Luceros north of Alcalde and a new visitor center will open to the public.

Mary Cabot Wheelwright, founder of the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, owned this property from 1923 until her death in 1958. The main house, perhaps 50 years old when she bought it, stood as an elegant mansion of uncommon style for its time and place.

The Georgian floor plan has a central hall and a two-story white wood portico encircles the house, giving it an Antebellum look, according to Beverley Spears, who was in charge of recent restoration efforts for the Los Luceros Foundation. "This style is an expression of Greek Revival popular in the Eastern U.S. in the early 1800s. It was still popular in remote New Mexico in the 1860s and 1870s long after it was passé back east."

Today, huge trumpet vines wrap around several of the posts of the ground-floor portal. In the kitchen sits Wheelwright's original stove, an example of items from the house during her ownership the Los Luceros Foundation is trying to find; the stove was obtained from Genevieve Ortiz.





The dining room of the main house at Los Luceros

Upstairs is the grand sala with fireplaces on both ends of the room and, on one wall, a large painting of Wheelwright as a little girl. Down the hall is Wheelwright's old bedroom, now outfitted with a replica bed built by Jim Thomas and a lovely *colcha* bedcover by Beatrice Maestas Sandoval. The bedroom across the hall, where Maria Chabot slept when she stayed at Los Luceros, includes one of two fireplaces in the house that were hand-decorated by the painter Olive Rush, a friend of Wheelwright's.

Soon after buying the house, Wheelwright ordered a renovation. "They kept the skeleton of the building – the adobe walls, portales and hipped roof – but added new doors and windows, a kitchen and ground-floor bathroom and eight fireplaces, all done in the Pueblo Revival style," Spears said.

One of the important things about this property, she added, is that it has been altered very little since the 1920s — the house had not been occupied at all since Charles Collier left more than 25 years ago — so it was easy to restore it to Wheelwright's era.

"It was a pretty daunting project. This is a major piece of architecture, and it was challenging because of some of the structural issues," Spears said. "We actually had the

southwest corner of the house collapse when several of us were inside. I'll never forget that."

The level of groundwater around the house varies from three to nine feet below the surface and the building had settled about six inches because of the adobe getting wet. The workers found about six inches of cobbles under the walls but that original "foundation" had long since sunk into the soil. The house had sustained damage from surface flooding and animals had burrowed into the walls.

"Those thick adobe walls make a darn good structure but Wheelwright's crew didn't understand adobe very well," Spears said. "They carved deep closets into the walls, which would weaken them structurally, and they repaired walls not with adobe but with cement and cobbles. They did have some fine carpenters — they did a great staircase and windows."

The recent restoration, completed late in 2001, included new wall plaster, inside and out, and wood-floor repair and finishing in the transparent glazes of bright colors and black that were original to the Wheelwright remodeling. The architect used early photographs to reproduce missing details such as an *alacena* (recessed cupboard) in an upstairs bedroom, and the kitchen linoleum.

Spears' new visitor center was conceived as a collection of adobe structures surrounding an informal *placita* (small plaza). The 5,000-square-foot complex includes a café, a shop specializing in Hispanic and Native American arts, a staff house and a produce stand. The Los Luceros Foundation is working on a new garden and the stand will feature goods from that plot as well as vegetables from the organic farm of Ron and Gail Ice next door.

In some respects Los Luceros continues to function as a working ranch. Each year the Foundation donates wool sheared from its resident churro sheep, and staff harvests eggs from the chickens and milk from the cows — the adjacent pasture also holds goats, guineafowl, turkeys, ducks and donkeys. There's also an orchard and ranch manager Margarito Hernandez keeps all the fruit trees pruned and healthy, among his other duties.

The visitor center is a great-looking building with a rectangular bay-window projection and portales with steel roofs on tapered posts. The plaster on the interior walls of the reception sala and the arts shops is natural earth with clay for strength and sand to help prevent shrinkage and cracking.

The facility with its more angular styling and details such



One end of the grand second-floor sala, with fireplace decorated by Olive Rush. Below, Mary Cabot Wheelwright's bedroom.

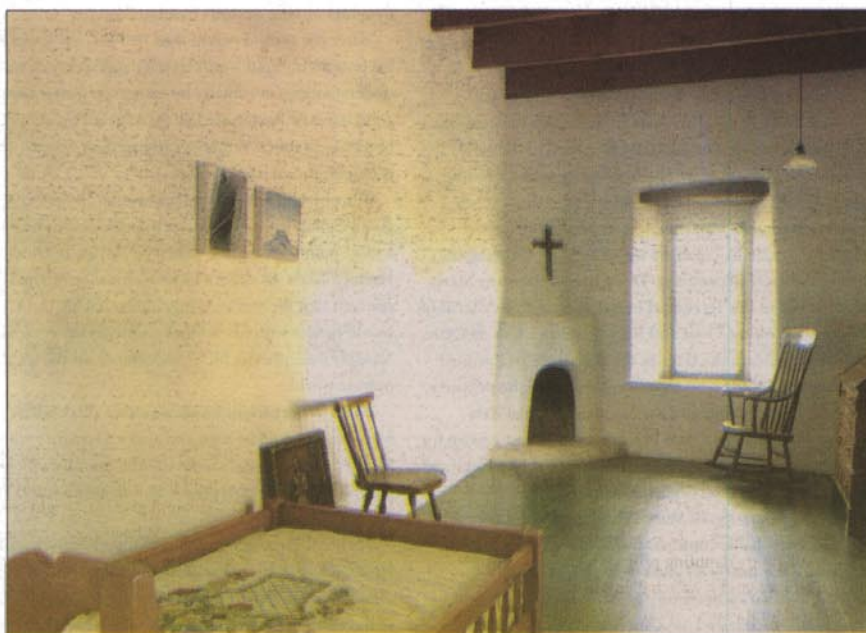
as heavy glass interior doors and a cantilevered steel canopy over the shop door "is meant to complement the authentic historic structures on the site without being misread as historic in its own right," Spears said.

During a visit in early April, Barbara Candelario, administrative assistant to Foundation director Bill Binnewies, pointed to another restoration job now under way: the old chapel on the property, which is owned by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe. The work is being done by San Juan Parish, Los Luceros Foundation and Cornerstones Community Partnerships. "A new altar is being built and we hope the chapel will open soon for services," she said.

Candelario added that the Los Luceros Foundation has also worked on the nearby Rio Grande bosque, clearing out tamarisk and planting thousands of cottonwoods and willows in conjunction with the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service.

Beverly Spears believes the main Los Luceros house likely incorporated several older adobe rooms at its southwest corner, but the actual antiquity of the building is unknown.

"As is often the case with impressive old adobe buildings, over time the two-story residence of the Los Luceros Ranch





The new visitor center designed by Beverley Spears. Below, the chapel owned by the Archdiocese of Santa Fe is nestled in a grove of flowering crabapples.

has accumulated layers of legend about its origins that extend back before the founding of Oñate's colony," writes Corinne Sze in her *History of the Los Luceros Ranch*.

The 2000 report, a treasure of a find for anyone interested in this property or local history in general, offers intricate detail on the history of settlement in the area as well as a portrait of life at Los Luceros for Wheelwright and her help — Joseph Posey, groundsman and horse-tender; his wife Mildred, cook and house manager; and Albert Staples, chauffeur — who lived on the house's ground floor during the Wheelwright years.

It was Juan de Oñate who, in 1598, led a group of 129 colonists and 10 Franciscan friars with 7,000 head of livestock up the Rio Grande Valley to found New Mexico's first capital, named San Gabriel, at the nearby confluence of the Chama River and the Rio Grande.

Sze reports on archaeologist David Snow's findings, based on an analysis of artifacts from the Los Luceros site, that historic occupation can only be traced to the early years of the 19th century. The first owner of the building was probably Luis Maria Ortiz, who was in the seventh generation directly descended from Nicolás Ortiz and Mariana Coronado, colonists with Diego de Vargas at the time of the 1693 Reconquest. During the 1880s Luis Maria Ortiz served in the Territorial Legislature and was sheriff of Rio Arriba County. Ortiz and his wife, Eliza Clark de Ortiz, are buried beneath the floor of the chapel at Los Luceros.

Wheelwright, the next significant owner of the property, was a founding member of the Spanish Colonial Arts Society and the Indian Arts Fund, but she is best known for her pioneering work in preserving the sacred knowledge and religious articles of the Navajo Indians.

"Any consideration of Mary Wheelwright is inevitably a study in improbable contrasts framed by the two periods into which her nearly 80 years were almost equally divided," Sze writes in *History of the Los Luceros Ranch*.

"The first, which lasted until she was about 40, was characterized by reticence and devotion to duty, as she



lived out the conventional life of a frail, unmarried, only daughter among Boston's first families.

"After her second parent died in 1917, she broke out to become an intrepid world traveler and seeker of spiritual understanding, eventually forsaking altogether the narrow constraints of Boston society for a life on the move, with homes in Majorca, remote northern New Mexico and an island off the coast of Maine."

Wheelwright had a fateful encounter in the early 1920s at the Gallup Inter-Tribal Ceremonial. There she purchased a sand-painting tapestry woven by Navajo religious leader Hosteen Klah. As she got to know him she learned of his concern that the stories, songs and ritual artifacts he held would be lost with his death, because so many young Navajos were placing more importance on the ways of the outside world.

"With Wheelwright he envisioned a place where his artifacts could be seen and studied together with sound recordings and copies of sand paintings by future generations of his own people as well as the world at large," Sze writes.

Their collaboration — Wheelwright began recording Hosteen Klah's myths and songs in the large sala of the main house in 1927 — resulted in the 1938 establishment of the House of Navajo Religion, which was changed to the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art and then, after

the director's death, to the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.

We learn from Sze's study that Wheelwright was rarely alone at Los Luceros. Frequent guests included her cousin, Lucy Cabot, and friends including Olive Rush, Georgia O'Keeffe and Maria Chabot. Chabot, who had lived at Ghost Ranch with O'Keeffe 1940-45, subsequently moved to Los Luceros and stayed until 1961.

When Wheelwright died in 1958, the main house went to the museum, which almost immediately sold it to Charles Collier. This man, before coming to New Mexico, helped establish the Soil Conservation Service, served as cultural attaché to Bolivia and was a farming innovator. His wife, Nina, was one of the country's first woman architects and won the Marshall Field National Award for her "Young Audiences" program to bring professional musicians into the schools, in addition to raising five children.

The Colliers long enjoyed residence at Los Luceros — Nina died in 1973 and Charles moved to Santa Fe three years later. After the Collier stewardship, Los Luceros had a number of owners — including a Netherlands company that planned to subdivide the property for about 17 homesites — before Frank and Ann Cabot established the Los Luceros Foundation to restore and preserve it.

The house and the old land-grant property surrounding it are on the National Register of Historic Places.



The sala of the Los Luceros house, once upon a time

HISTORIC PHOTOS COURTESY LOS LUCEROS FOUNDATION

Events celebrate historic preservation

Santa Fe celebrates Heritage Preservation Week in 2004 with a number of events to be held Monday, May 3, through Sunday, May 9. The theme is "Santa Fe - A Unique Heritage."

6 p.m. Monday — "New Mexico Spanish Colonial Mission Architecture," a lecture by the Very Reverend Jerome J. Martinez e Alire, historian and rector, St. Francis Cathedral. Spon-

sored by Southwest Seminars. At Hotel Santa Fe. \$10 admission.

6 p.m. Tuesday — "New Excavations at the Palace of the Governors," a lecture by archaeologist Steve Post

of the New Mexico Office of Archaeological Studies. Hotel Santa Fe. Free.

7 p.m. Wednesday — "Preserving the Message from the Past," a lecture by Ed Crocker of Crocker Ltd. Architectural Conservation. Sponsored by the Old Santa Fe Association. At Santuario de Guadalupe. Free.

6-8 p.m. Thursday — Santa Fe Heritage Preservation Awards ceremony and reception at Scottish Rite Temple, hosted by Mayor Larry Delgado. Ceremony and temple tours sponsored by Historic Santa Fe Foundation and Old Santa Fe Association. Free.

2-8 p.m. Friday — Free "Old Adobe: Historic Building and Cultural Resource Fair" at Sweeney Convention Center. Experts sched-

uled to give demonstrations include Bonifacio Armijo, laying traditional mud floors; Miguel Chavez and Ruben Gonzales, traditional furniture woodcarving; Deborah Shapiro, window restoration; and Office of Archaeological Studies, arrowhead-making.

Lectures for the big Friday event are scheduled at 2:30 p.m., Fabrizio Borchia on "Window Restoration: Tools and Techniques; 3 p.m., Peter Brill of Sarcon Construction on "Bringing Your Dream to Fruition — The Nuts & Bolts of Designing and Building in the Historic District; 3:30 p.m., Richard Owens of El Rey Stucco talking about new products; 4 p.m., Charles Haeckler from the National Park Service

on "Historic Trails in the Southwest"; and 4:30 p.m., Samantha Ruscavage of Community Solutions Inc. on "Conducting Community Outreach on Historic Preservation Projects."

Noon Saturday and noon Sunday — Screenings of *Red Sky at Morning*, CCA Cinematheque. \$7.50 admission.

1-4 p.m. Sunday — Historic Santa Fe Foundation 2004 Historic House Tour. Maps and check-in at El Zaguán, 545 Canyon Road.

Heritage Preservation Week events are partially funded by a grant from the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division, Department of Cultural Affairs. For more information, contact event coordinator Edward Archuleta at 820-7452.



Nina Collier (left) entertaining in the Los Luceros dining room. Charles and Nina Collier lived at Los Luceros from 1958 and into the 1970s.