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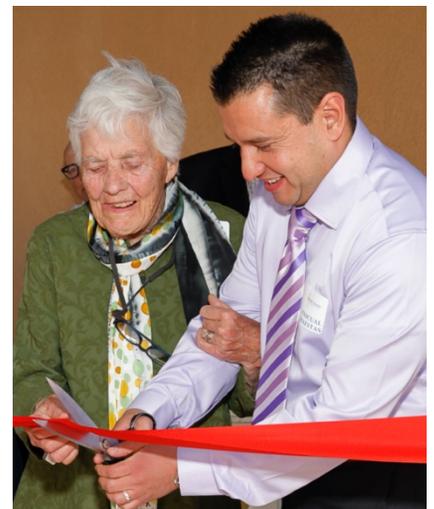
Leaving a living legacy

Art historian and preservationist Virginia Couse Leavitt has passed on

Virginia Couse Leavitt, the co-founder and guiding light of Couse-Sharp Historic Site in Taos, NM, died November 26, 2024, in Taos at the age of 92. Leavitt was the principal scholar on the work of her grandfather Eanger Irving Couse, the first president of the Taos Society of Artists. Along with her late husband, Ernest Leavitt, she was the driving force behind preserving the archive, home and studio of Couse along with the property of neighbor Joseph Henry Sharp, also one of the original six members of the TSA.

“Speaking for the staff, board, and others associated with the Site, we are bereft,” said Davison Koenig, CSHS executive director and curator. “That’s an old-fashioned word, but as a fine writer and a lover of language, Ginnie would approve, I believe. Even through her last years, she has been present in all our lives, keenly interested and involved in the programs and operations of the site. The preservation of the buildings and grounds, and ensuring that the archive and collections remain available and relevant to future scholars through The Lunder Research Center, was her life’s work.”

Leavitt, who lived as a child at the Couse Home and returned during the summers throughout her life, spent some 35 years researching and writing her masterwork, *Eanger Irving Couse: The Life and Times of an American Artist, 1866-1936*, which was published in 2019 by the University of Oklahoma Press. The 400-page book represents one facet of her legacy. She devoted decades to maintaining and obtaining records that formed the seed of the impressive archive at the heart of The Lunder Research Center. Over the past several years, she worked with CSHS staff to expand the Couse Catalog Raisonné, which is becoming the most detailed,



Clockwise from top: Virginia Couse Leavitt in the garden designed by her grandmother and namesake at Couse-Sharp Historic Site, 2023; Young Ginnie Couse, right, with her grandfather, the heralded painter E. I. Couse, and her little brother Irving; with Taos Mayor Pascualito Maestas cutting the ribbon in 2022 for The Lunder Research Center on the Couse-Sharp Historic Site campus.



From top: In 2019 with the first published copy of the biography of Couese she wrote; with Site Coordinator Jake Cisneros sharing morning coffee in the Couese Home kitchen in 2024

multimedia rich, and dynamic data collection on a single artist currently extant.

From its founding until her death, Leavitt served as secretary of the board of directors of The Couese Foundation, the nonprofit organization that owns and operates CSHS. Carl Jones, former chair and president of The Couese Foundation, fondly recalled his long relationship with Ginnie and their partnership to achieve her vision for the Site. “To say that someone is irreplaceable is, in most cases, an overstatement; but in Ginnie’s case it was absolutely true because she literally was our living connection to members of the Taos Society of Artists and to the history of the Site,” he said. He added that “her personal connection to the past, coupled with her scholarship, enthusiasm, and inspirational leadership, were the ‘magic sauce’ that made it possible for the Foundation to re-imagine the Couese-Sharp Historic Site as the world-class campus it is today, and it was my great honor to sit by her side during that exhilarating journey.”

The Leavitts spent summers in Taos for many years repairing and restoring the property, giving tours to curious passersby, and continuing her research. In 2001, with the help of an attorney and art collector named Al Olson and other associates, they started a nonprofit. “In this way, the Couese family could entrust their national treasure to dedicated volunteers and museum staff to keep it safe and thriving for decades to come,” explained Rich Rinehart, a former president and chair of the organization.

On a more personal note, Rinehart added, “Over the 11 years that I was privileged to work

with Ginnie at the CSHS, I learned to listen for her deep insights and profound love for the site and what was called for in the moment. I will always treasure our time together, her gentle ways yet firm hand in guiding the Foundation and teaching me how to both lead and follow at the same time. We will all miss her so.”

Marie Watkins, PhD, professor emerita of art history at Furman University and a member of the CSHS National Advisory Committee, said, “Ginnie meticulously researched the details of the life of E. I. Couese, his art and collections. She presented countless public presentations locally and throughout the country, and her biography is the definitive scholarly source on Couese. Through her hands-on effort, she realized her dream to transform the Couese property into the epicenter for research and scholarship of the Taos Society of Artists and other early Taos artists. The historic site is the tangible conservation of cultural identity, where one feels the Taos past, present and future.”

Current Chair of the Board Elizabeth Crittenden Palacios noted that Leavitt had been named a Remarkable Woman of Taos in 2012 and a Taos Unsung Hero in 2019. “Ginnie was a visionary



leader whose tireless dedication to the arts and the history of the Taos community has shaped the cultural landscape for generations to come,” she said. “Her commitment to preserving the legacy of her grandfather and her unwavering support of the local artistic community have profoundly affected all who knew her. She was a respected preservationist and a dear friend and mentor to many. Her passion, generosity, and visionary spirit will be greatly missed, but her work and the



foundation she built will continue to inspire and uplift future generations.”

Koenig added, “Ginnie is the soul of Couse-Sharp Historic Site, and I say that in the present tense. She created and embodied a culture of not only dedication and excellence but also close relationships and goodwill. These are key to why and how we have been successful in our mission. She called the good luck and can-do spirit of this organization ‘Couse mojo,’ and she believed in it fully. We’ve always suspected that the mojo was really her love and care, and we will carry that and all facets of her legacy with us into the future.”



For additional information on Leavitt’s fascinating and full life, see the remembrance prepared by her family at <http://bit.ly/3OIIUq9>. A public memorial service in Taos is planned in May 2025; keep an eye on couse-sharp.org for details.

In lieu of flowers, those who wish to honor Ginnie’s memory can donate to the Virginia Couse Leavitt Memorial Fund at Couse-Sharp Historic Site, as she would have wished. For information, see couse-sharp.org/donate.

More appreciations of Ginnie Leavitt

Artist Josh Elliott: “To think of Ginnie in that beautiful place, carrying the torch of her grandfather, and for the legacy of art in Taos, brings hope that we can possibly live with that kind of intention. She was so kind to me, quick with a smile and generous with her compliments and homemade pie! There is now a huge void in Taos and the greater Western art world. This gentle icon will be missed by so many people.”

From top: Ginnie with her late husband, Ernie Leavitt, on the Couse portal in 2013; with Marissa Hendriks, Lunder Center director and Virginia Couse Leavitt Archivist Chair, perusing Ginnie’s research materials on her grandfather in 2022; with Executive Director and Curator Davison Koenig outside the Couse dining room.



CSHS National Advisory Council member Marie Watkins, PhD: “The first time that I met Ginnie, over 30 years ago, I was a graduate student, an emerging J. H. Sharp researcher. She reached out to me and invited me to her home for supper with her husband, Ernie. This was the beginning of mentoring, collaboration and friendship. I am one of many art historians who have broken bread at their community kitchen table—Long John Dunn’s gambling table—to discuss, debate, share research and tell tales of Taos artists and history. The Lunder Research Center as an archive and educational institution holds the largest collection in the country of documents, photographs, artifacts, and paintings of E. I. Couese and Ginnie’s great-uncle-in-law Julius Rolshoven, and it all began with her prescient preservation of materials in her home. Her scholarship, generosity to young scholars and creation of The Lunder Research Center form a legacy to be honored and emulated, an expression of faith in the evolution of scholarship of Taos and northern New Mexico and the importance of this unique place in the larger history of art.”



Artist Glenn Dean: “Ginnie had an infectious smile that could make anyone feel good. She had a sparkle in her eyes that radiated from the kindness in her heart. She was a sweet and loving person and very encouraging to me and my work. She will be sorely missed.”

Leavitt posing in 2021 for a sculpture created and donated by Ed Smida. The bronze bust is installed in the library at the research center.