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UNSUNG HEROES 2019

Unsung Hero: Virginia Couse Leavitt

A granddaughter preserves her family's artistic heritage like a time capsule

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It's almost like looking into a mirror. Virginia Couse Leavitt peers up at the portrait of her grandma and the woman she is named after, which was painted by her famous grandpa, E.I. Couse. The painting hangs in the historic Couse home. Her grandma is the fabled gardener of the homestead.



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By Amy Boaz

Until she was six years old, Virginia Couse Leavitt lived year-round in the sprawling homestead of her famous grandparents on Kit Carson Road. She rode horses with the Randall children (later of Randall Lumber) and played at Taos Pueblo with the numerous children of her grandpa's favorite model, Ben Lujan – immortalized by I.E. Couse in his sensitive paintings of Native Americans that formed the tone for the Taos Society of Artists, which he co-founded in 1915.

Indeed, it was a magical time at the Couse homestead in Taos, Couse Leavitt remembers, especially when a secret step-down playroom was added – accessed through the kitchen cupboard a la C.S. Lewis – where today several photos of her in her grandfather's lap now stand. She was only 4 years old when her grandpa died, but she remembers vividly running into his painting studio to call him to lunch and he would throw her over his shoulders "like a sack of potatoes."

By the time she was a young teen, she did not come as much to Taos, as her grandmother, her namesake and the fabled gardener of the Couse homestead, had died, as well as her mother. Virginia's father, Kibbey, remarried, and the family resided in California. Virginia's older sister, Elizabeth, was more of an artist than her

sister, she says; Virginia was interested in writing and married a museum curator, Ernest Leavitt. The two raised a family in Tucson, where Leavitt was curator at Arizona State Museum and Virginia got a degree in art history when the children were grown – specifically medieval art history, where learning how to research and chronicle archives was mandatory.

The combined talents of a museum curator and an art historian and researcher – was this a marriage made in heaven for the granddaughter of legendary Taos artist E.I. Couse?

“Unknowingly,” Couse Leavitt admits, “I was preparing myself for my life’s work – research into my grandfather and the Taos Society of Artists.”

Kibbey had died in 1978, and Virginia’s younger brother, Irving, was taking care of the property. When Virginia’s husband retired in the late 1980s, the couple began to spend six months of the year in Taos to help her brother with the care of the homestead. The place was like a time capsule, thanks to Kibbey, a mechanical engineer who had not allowed changes to the homestead over the decades – indeed, his machine shop is one of the most riveting parts of the house.

“There was a treasure trove here that we realized had to be preserved,” says Couse Leavitt. And the family agreed that the Leavitts, with their combined professional talents, were the natural ones to do it. “We were trained,” says Virginia. “We knew what had to be done but did not know how to do it.” That would come when a foundation was started in 2001.

The house is nestled next to the land and studio of Henry Sharp, a fellow Taos Society Artist and friend of Couse. The Sharps had no children of their own, and considered the Couse children and grandchildren part of the family; when the artist died in 1953, the property was sold to Kibbey with the condition that he would retain “life estate.” The Sharp site includes the Luna Chapel, which Sharp converted into his first studio, and the larger studio he built in 1915.

Virginia marvels how the whole space exists in its originality: “[My father] loved it here. The main rooms are still furnished as they were.”

Sadly, the great artist Couse was not a writer; he did not keep diaries or letters. His wife, Virginia Walker Couse, provided the material, says the granddaughter and namesake.

“She had 276 letters she wrote to her family back in Washington state [where her family lived],” says Virginia. The letters are a rich, rare archive of the couple’s early years in Paris together, in the 1880s, where E.I. was studying painting, as well as of their first years in Taos, in the early 1900s. One detail was how miserable Virginia was in 1902, the hottest summer ever recorded in Taos – yet she writes how ecstatic her husband was to find his life’s subject matter in the Taos Pueblo Indians.

What did the Indians think of Couse’s depictions of them? Virginia relays a telling moment when Robert Mirabal (who may or may not be related to Couse’s model Jerry Mirabal) came to the house in the late 1990s and observed Couse’s work for a long while. He then declared: “They showed [the Indians] as they were,” which Virginia understood to mean that her grandfather’s depictions were “close to nature.” Another Native observer of Couse’s rendering of the San Geronimo festival at the Pueblo declared: “He captured the essence of it.”

What Virginia calls the “Couse mojo” – everything happens when it is supposed to happen, even the weather, cast by the Taos Mountain spell – directed the course of Virginia’s career from then on. She wrote a retrospective of E.I. Couse for the Albuquerque Museum in 1991, and a major biography, “Eanger Irving Couse: The Life and Times of An American Artist (1866-1939)” (University of Oklahoma Press, 2019). The Leavitts found help in establishing a foundation in 2001 thanks to a lawyer from Chicago, Al Olson, and things “developed little by little,” intimates Virginia, “now speeding along rapidly” – and she gestures a steep upward ascent.

Virginia Couse Leavitt articulates the Couse-Sharp Foundation mission going forward as incorporating a research center, the Lunder Research Center and Archives of the Taos Society of Artists, which will open in two years and already employs three staff members. Their three-pronged effort, which relies on donations and grants, incorporates a canny scheme of preservation, restoration and renovation.

According to artist and DAFA gallery owner David Mapes, who nominated Virginia Couse Leavitt as an Unsung Hero, Taos is incredibly lucky to have found her. "She has preserved, with the intention to share, her family's legacy of Taos art history ... for anybody who wants to explore," he notes.

And her role now?

She laughs, then replies after a thoughtful pause: "Resident historian." Or perhaps she means, "resident memory," as she ambles about the efflorescent garden, pointing out her grandmother's touches – "She used the garden as her palette" – and the quirks of this curious old homestead frozen in time. For only Virginia Couse Leavitt knows just what was what and what once was.