Six men and 100 years
What did the Taos Society of Artists begin a century ago?

By Rick Romancito

Many will say the flood began with the "wagon wheel" incident.
That's the oft-told tale of how Eastern artists Ernest Blumenschein and Bert Phillips happened upon Taos after a wheel broke on their wagon while on a painting trip to Mexico in 1898. They even took pictures. Others will point out that Blumenschein and Phillips wouldn't have known about Taos if it weren't for Joseph Henry Sharp who regaled them with tales describing this undiscovered country where Pueblo Indians and Hispanics lived in a lovely valley untouched by time — or exposure.

According to the Couse-Sharp Historic Site website, cause-sharp.org, the cultures and the spectacular light here caused Phillips to say to Blumenschein, "For heaven's sake, tell people what we have found! Send some artists out here. There is a lifetime's work for 20 men."

It wasn't long before these men began to tell others and soon Taos had become a place implanted as a vision of immaculate perception. Ultimately, the sky who came first — Sharp, Blumenschein, Phillips and later Herbert Dunton, Oscar Bermanhaus and E.L. Couse — decided there must be a way to collectively organize for mutual benefit, and thus the Taos Society of Artists was born.

One hundred years ago this week, specifically on July 15, 1915, they had their first meeting in one of the rooms rented by Oscar Bermanhaus at the home of Dr. T. Paul Martin. That home is now the Taos Inn at 125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte.

This week, a variety of special events are planned to take note of this milestone in Taos (see schedule and sidebar below).

By the time the Society disbanded in 1927, it was made up of 12 active members which included: Bert Phillips, Ernest Blumenschein, Irving Couse, Joseph H. Sharp, Oscar Bermanhaus, Herbert Dunton, Julius Rolshoven, Walter Ufer, Victor Higgins, Martin Hennings, Kenneth Adams and Catherine Critcher.

During its existence, the Society managed to make Taos known to the world through entry in major exhibitions, traveling shows and railroad advertisements. In many ways, they were the first marketing experts. Their work was successful in that it accomplished lofty goals of furthering a style of romantic realism they felt best interpreted what they saw, while establishing what they felt was a kind of Barbizon-like school of art by attracting other artists — and writers — to the region with similar intentions, according to Elizabeth Cunningham, co-author of "In Contemporary Rhythm: The Art of Ernest L. Blumenschein" (2008, University of Oklahoma Press).

In a sense, the area was ripe for the picking. But, what did they pick? From whom? And, to what end?

The Society certainly made an impact, one they may not have known during the members' lifetimes but it has borne out in the number of art galleries and artists who make their homes and living here. Their success was also notable because at the time they were getting their work out into the world, the world was gradually taking note of a radical artistic vision centered on abstract expressionism. This avant-garde had already taken hold in 1890s France and was quickly becoming an influence at a time realism was being judged as unsophisticated.

It was an uphill fight to be sure. But to the people in their world, there was little of it to notice.

Barbara Brenner, granddaughter of Oscar Bermanhaus.

Culture Art Market
An exhibition hosted by the Taos Arts Council titled "The Culture Art Market: Pueblo and Hispanic Art in Taos" opens with a public reception today (July 9) at 5 p.m. in the Historic Taos County Courthouse on north side of Taos Plaza. The show, according to TAC President Paul Figueroa, continues through July 19. Among the artists planning to exhibit are Bruce Grenier, Jonathan Warm, Day Coming, Anita Rodriguez, Roger Martinez, Michael Vigel, Dan Vigel, Juanita Lavado, Daniel Romero, Enrico Trujillo, Carlos Barile and family, John Susko, Jeralyn Lujuan Lucero, Ramona Montaño. Ilona Spruce is assisting with additional Taos Pueblo artists.

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JULY 9-15, 2015
100 Years and Beyond: Readings from Taos Literature

In celebration of the 100-year anniversary of the Taos Society of Artists, the Society of the Museum of the Southwest (SOMOS), is organizing a Read-A-Thon featuring local readings from their favorite Taos writers, authors, and artists. The three event is planned next Thursday (July 16), from 10 a.m. until 1 p.m. in the Mural Room at the Historic Taos County Courthouse on the north side of Taos Plaza.

"The July 16 reading will be a feast of words to honor the rich legacy linking the visual and literary arts in our community," SOMOS co-director David Perez said in a press statement. "We're sure to hear excerpts from historical novels like Frank Waters, Mabel Dodge Luhan, John Nichols and D.H. Lawrence. We'll also hear people from all kinds of written material: Letters from Ernest Hemingway and (Bert) Phillips, an article by James Joyce by John Suazo, a story by Rob Chavez, children's tales by Jonathan Wamn Day Cooking, and poems by Peter Rabbit, who (with Annie MacNaughton) started the famous Taos Poetry Circus, to name just a few. It's going to be a nice mix of our history."

Perez said "the response has been great," and that, as of press time, the list of readers is still growing. Among the scheduled readers are Daniel Escamante, Bill Whaley, Elizabeth Cunningham, Maria Dolores Gonzalez, Magdalene Smith, Phaedra Greenwood, Diana Rico, Sam Richardson, Steve Fox, Judith Rama, and many more.

Admission is free, but donations will be welcome. For more information, call SOMOS at (575) 758-0061.

Winter Funeral’ by Victor Higgins, hanging in the Harwood Museum at the artist's request.

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says her family has been here since 1899. "This is where we are and this is where we are staying. Taos is the place to be," she said.

Brener recalled that the Society members "were friends and close to all of us. They were all good citizens of Taos. I think they had a lot of fun. They had a lot of balls and dinner parties."

Her grandfather, in particular, was so good humored he was often called "the glue that held the Taos Society of Artists together" because of his diplomacy when thorny matters came up. "He was a really good guy," she said. Interestingly, she said her grandfather was the only Society member who was self-taught.

"He took three semesters of night school, I guess he was just born with the ability."

It is said the members engaged with people in the community as models and as friends. Some, like Virginia Couse Havitt, said one of her grandfather's models was like a father to her (See “10 Questions” on Page 10). Their influence, by way of Taos Pueblo's Antonio Luhan (Mabel Dodge Luhan's husband), helped alert the nation to the dangerous precedent represented by the Burrus Bill right about the time the Society was first gathering. The Bill would have affirmed the rights of squatters on tens of thousands of acres of tribal lands.

As time marched on, critics would look upon this relationship a bit differently, wondering whether the efforts of the Society were less promotion and more exploitation. It is a fact that art in Taos and New Mexico was being created by Native and Hispanic people long before the wagon wheel broke. This event this week will likely shed light on this debate, while also illustrating the depth of influence felt by this day in the art and artists of Taos. It was a lively time back then, and it's still a lively place to live. We urge you to take advantage of this occasion to listen to the variety of voices, take in the art exhibitions on view, and find a way to see the connections old and new.

Firehouse collection to be shown

"Celebrating the Centuries of Taos" is planned to partner with the Taos Volunteer Fire Department and open its public collection of art by Taos Society of Artists and many additional Taos artists for the enjoyment of visitors and residents. The open house is planned Tuesday (July 14), 1-4 p.m., at the Taos Volunteer Fire Department, 400 Camino de la Placita, Taos. Admission is free. For more information, call (575) 779-8579.

Learning about the artists

The Taos Art Museum at Fechin House will celebrate the Taos Society of Artists on the very day of its 100th anniversary, Wednesday (July 15), from 5:30-6:30 p.m. with a special edition of Learning the Collections.

"We'll look at the various ways that the founders viewed and portrayed individual Puebloan and Indian cultures, in their endeavors to create uniquely American art," a press release states. "From idealism to ethnography, our survey will highlight the vision of the artists and the way they reflected broader American social views."

The Learning the Collections program gives participants an opportunity to examine works of art as a whole: their materials, composition, and techniques and hear the artist's story.

Group size is limited to foster discussion, observation, and enjoyment. Call ahead to reserve a place (575) 758-2690. Ext. 101. Admission is $10, but free for members. Taos Art Museum at Fechin House is located at 227 Paseo del Pueblo Norte. Parking is free.

Schedule of events

Tuesday (July 14)
9 a.m. Historic Walk with Ginny & Ernie Leavitt, grandchildren of E.I. Couse. Also, visit the Couse-Sharp Historic Site for the special exhibition, "Italy to Taos: Hohloven and the Taos Society of Artists"
1-4 p.m. Open House, Firehouse Exhibit at Taos Fire Department, 323 Camino de la Placita. Since 1954 Taos artists have donated paintings to recognize the efforts of the Taos Volunteer Fire Department.

Wednesday (July 15)
Mural Room open all day at the Historic Taos County Courthouse, Taos Plaza northside
9 a.m. Historic Taos Plaza Walk
10 a.m. Official Welcome by Al Olson
10:30 a.m. Film screening: "It's Like Going Back in Time 100 Years" presented by Tom Azzari
11 a.m. Lecture: "What Back Brought to the Table" on W.A. Denton by historian Michael Grauer
12:30-2 p.m. Benefit Lunch at the Taos Inn, 125 Paseo del Pueblo Norte, Costs $30 per person. Call to RSVP (575) 779-8579.
2 p.m. Flamenco dancers
2:15 p.m. Historic Courthouse and Fresco Lecture by David Henry and Rachel Preston Pinz
3 p.m. Taos County Historical Society Audiotapes: Bert Phillips speaking on the murals he painted in Taos
3:15 p.m. Lecture "Ernest Blumenstein — a Painting History"
4 p.m. Film: "Up Close and Personal with Uncle Henry" presented by Tom Azzari
4:30 p.m. Memories of Oscar Bemingham — Barbara Brener, granddaughter of Bemingham
5 p.m. Closing Comments, delivered by Carl Jones, President of The Couse Foundation
5:30 p.m. "Learning the Collections — Charles Stewart" (see sidebar)

Thursday (July 16)
10 a.m.-1 p.m. 100 Years and Beyond: Readings from Taos Literature (see sidebar)
2 p.m. Tour and picnic of Sierra Vista Cemetery. Many of Taos artists rest at Sierra Vista. Find them and their story on a tour with Thom Wheeler. Bring your own meal and refreshments.
Sunday (July 19)
Noon: Festas da Santiago y Santa Ana Parade, featuring a reconstruction of the Taos Society of Artists 1929 float with the "Broken Wheel."