

El Rancho Hotel designated as historic site

Written by By Cody Begaye Sun Correspondent
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Gallup hotel now part of Hollywood history

The Lost Dutchman Chapter No. 5917 of the Ancient and Honorable Order of E Clampus Vitus, a fraternal organization dedicated to preserving the heritage of the American West, dedicated a plaque to the El Rancho Hotel, Aug. 10. The location, at 1000 E. Hwy. 66, is now a historical site.

The El Rancho Hotel was constructed in 1936 for R.E. Griffith, brother of filmmaker D.W.

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Griffith, and served as a base camp for movie crews and actors. That site and its proximity to western landscapes, made it an ideal place to make movies.

When Lois Lane was trapped on the road as an earthquake struck in the 1978 epic *Superman*, it was filmed on State Road 43A, east of Gallup.

When Woody Harrelson and Juliette Lewis took their crime spree on the road in *Natural Born Killers* (1994), the cameras were filming along Highway 666 (now known as U.S. Highway 491) and downtown Gallup.

Leroy McCray, who worked the front desk of El Rancho for 27 years recalled, "People like Kirk Douglas, John Wayne, Katharine Hepburn stayed here, and made movies, worldwide movies."

Decades ago, he said, when these actors made their movies, Interstate 40 did not exist, but Highway 66 did. "Anyone traveling on [Highway] 66 can stop here and be where movie stars stayed. And when you see their movies, you'll recognize these areas."

As a child who was raised traditionally by his grandparents, McCray recalled the heady experience of seeing nearby locations on the big screen at the former drive-in movie theater.

With all the stage and screen actors and directors who passed through the lobby, McCray still remembers the many westerns filmed in the region, one recent example being *The Lone Ranger* (2013). He told about how production crews and their trucks would park in a lot across from El Rancho and make the nearly 200-mile drive to and from Monument Valley every day.

But, there was always a slump in business once the movies finished production, McCray said. Then there was a particularly bad stretch that nearly forced the hotel to close.

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In 1984, the El Rancho Hotel went bankrupt. The doors were locked, and the marks from the big padlocks are still visible. The hotel eventually became run down.

Locals started to talk about the possibility of tearing down the El Rancho. But some wanted to save it. McCray said area residents began writing in, in support of the landmark.

The idea caught on and in 1986, the El Rancho was auctioned off in its very own lobby, the same place where the dedication ceremony was held, Aug. 10.

“The hotel was sold lock, stock, and barrel to Armand Ortega,” McCray said. “Ortega saved it from closing down.”

Efforts to restore the hotel to its glory days took time, but the hotel eventually reopened to the public in 1987. El Rancho has been owned by the Ortega family ever since.

McCray is excited. He says more restorations are underway. “We want to live up to what the banner outside says, ‘Charm of yesterday...Convenience of tomorrow.’”

Ken Dorsal, one of the Ex Noble Grand Humbug members of ECV, spoke about the El Rancho Hotel joining the ranks of over 65 other historical sites ECV has dedicated.

A plaque was presented to Amelia Ortega-Crowther, daughter of Armand Ortega, the person who saved the hotel from demolition when he purchased it 33 years ago.

“I love it when the hotel gets recognition for anything we do, especially if it’s preserving history,” Ortega-Crowther said after the dedication.

Members of ECV and the Gallup community turned out for the event, which included a history of

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the El Rancho, song and dance performances by the Zuni Pueblo, and was followed by the adult guests mingling in the 49er Lounge.

“People won’t forget what happened here,” Dorsal said. “We’re so excited to give [El Rancho] this monument dedication.”

By Cody Begaye
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