Part II of III

In spite of the rough-and-tumble early existence of mining and the railroad, Gallup has mostly always been an artful community. It took a few years, of course, to replace the male-dominated life with the gentler wants and needs of the distaff side who seemed to appear from everywhere and succeeded, as well as they could, in calming and taming the hardy, rough-hewn pioneers that dug and scraped and built this area with their sweat and muscles.

Even the construction of houses became an art form. Some women were not willing to accept four plain walls and a dirt floor, and the best of them insisted on a finer quality than men would have needed. As the town grew into a small city, women directed the advance without officially holding office of any kind. Instead, they used the ultimate power they had to convince or coerce their men into wanting what they did, what we call quality-of-life today.

It may have started with a white-washed exterior wall or two, or imported paint from Albuquerque – a two or three day trip by train. Or, with the use of well-laid bricks manufactured right here in town; perhaps a picket fence here and there, a favorite plant or plants nurtured in the Gallup sun, and a long list of other accoutrements to lend at least a touch of individuality to home or business, artfully.

And there were always the art of the Native Americans, who had discovered early in their history how to weave rugs on very primitive (relative to today) looms and how to used the native soil to create pottery in traditional ways. Encouraged by white traders on the reservations and other businessmen, the knowledge and ability increased gradually as economy demanded.

At some point, pencil or charcoal drawings by other Native Americans melded into painting and an aptitude and talent for detail began to shine through into more art. And there were also: sand paintings glued to wood or other material, beadwork, traditional and modern jewelry and a variety of other products, including leather, which added to the economy.

By the time of the first Ceremonial, these arts and crafts had developed into a burgeoning business that kept many families fed and clothed and the upward curve seemed as if it would never quit. Boom times in art, especially that of the Navajo and Zuni, rose with the demand created, and even in the largest American cities one could see examples of the different kinds of art produced in this area.

The only thing really lacking was a single organization that could semi-control and promote these arts to the fullest extent, but business was good anyway. Not too many people were concerned with what tomorrow could bring, at least not in Gallup. Other New Mexico cities saw the opportunities though.

Santa Fe and Albuquerque both benefitted from the work of “our” Native Americans, buying at low prices and selling at very high ones. Gallup became somewhat reduced to providing raw materials for these artists as the finished product flowed out of town with the money it could have generated.

Art, though, is always in a constant flux and eventually the artists discovered that there was more income to be had from selling their own goods rather than shipping it to another destination. That philosophy extended to those involved in higher valued pieces of work and the trend slowly revolved back to where it had begun.

Gallup now has listed in the yellow pages two ceramic manufacturers, over 30 retailers of Native American goods with another dozen or so in close proximity to the town, and over 20 manufacturers of Native goods, wholesale (some who are also retailers).

The number of home-operated producers are unknown, but adding in that unknown variable, and one can easily see the impact that these forms of art have on a small town of just over 22,000.

And that is just a short list of that specific art. Throw in the many murals that decorate buildings, the awards granted to the Octavia Fellin Public Library, the restoration of the almost 100-year old El Morro Theater, several dance studios, the Community Concert Association, Land of Enchantment Opera, and many other organizations that have art as their main focus and you quickly become aware of just how important art is to Gallup.

And never forget that it is not only the larger programs that determine importance, but the smaller ones as depicted in the photos taken at Earl's Restaurant, where many street vendors push their wares at the hungry visitors, whether local or from out-of-town.

The importance of art to Gallup simply cannot be overstated!

Part III, Different Approaches to Art, will be covered in the August 7 issue of The Gallup Sun.