

What These Walls Have Seen: Bootlegging, Wine and Community

By Kate Fraher and Gordene MacKenzie, the Los Ranchos Historical Society

The following article is excerpted and edited with permission from *A Brief Ownership History of 7809 4th Street* by Kate Fraher.

The historic adobe farmhouse at 7809 4th Street in the Village of Los Ranchos has been a community focal point for over 100 years. The new owners plan to continue this tradition.

Between 1915 and 1917, Juan and Candelaria Chavez built this two-story adobe, terrones, and wood frame gabled farmhouse on land that stretched from 4th Street to Guadalupe Trail. Part of the first floor served as the area's first general store. Juan and his children farmed the fields, raising livestock and selling meat, produce, and Candelaria's homemade pies in the store. They kept the store open on Sundays for the customers who stopped by on their way home from church.

During Prohibition Juan began storing bootleg liquor in the eaves of their house, which was, according to Billy Kitsch Gross, "evidently a poorly kept secret." When the family returned from a wedding, all the whiskey was gone. "Friends said that their dad knew exactly who had done it, but he was unable to go to the sheriff because he was not supposed to have whiskey. So their dad took care of it himself."

Years later, when Juan Chavez's real estate partner died by suicide, he lost everything and had to sell the house, according to his niece Priscillia Montoya.

4th Street was part of Route 66 in 1926 when Charles Morris and his wife Mary Chavez (no relation to Juan) bought the house for \$3000. Two years later, Mary moved to LA, leaving Charles, who was described by the Albuquerque Journal as "drunk and reckless." Reportedly, he wrongly accused a taxi driver of stealing his wallet. He fired three shots into the taxi building and threatened, "I'll shoot you all, open the door." Morris was charged with assault with intent to kill. At the time, however, New Mexico was the only state with no penalty for that crime.



Top: the original Chavez House. Bottom: The restored Chavez House.

During the Depression, J. Patrick O'Brien bought the property for \$4,750. After his death his sisters Mary and Fidelis farmed the land. Fidelis, an activist, was later appointed by the governor to the first White House Conference on aging.

Sixteen years later, Louis Gros, who had worked with the Christian Brothers Winery using New Mexican grapes to supply sacramental wine, which was exempt from Prohibition, bought the Juan Chavez house. 4th Street then was primarily agricultural. His family sold wine from the back porch of the house. It was rumored they sold brandy from the cellar. In 1957 Gros Winery was named the "largest winery in New Mexico."

Louis W. and Billie Gross, who the house passed to, listed the Chavez house in the New Mexico State Register of Cultural Properties in 1983. Billie's father, Wilfred Kitsch was instrumental in incorporating the Village of Los Ranchos in 1958 and served as the first of Mayor of Los Ranchos.

Louis and Billie sold the house to Frank Vallejos, a successful hair stylist, who modified the house for his business, "Style by Mr. Frank" in 1986. His wife, Aurora, converted the garage into a tanning salon. Frank and Connie Johnson rented it in 2018 and turned it into "Legacy Antiques."

Melanie and Eli Ludwig, Los Ranchos residents and owners of Groundwater Partners (GWP), a water and soil remediation company, bought the property in 2015. Melanie is an intuitive medicine practitioner and the president of GWP. Eli is a woodworker and Chief Hydrogeologist for GWP. When the Johnsons retired in 2021, the Ludwigs started a gentle restoration of the house, stripping away the 1980s additions and ushering out the ghosts. As owners of neighboring properties, they plan to restore the fields behind the old Wells Fargo building to honor the agricultural heritage of the village. They also plan to create a commercial gathering place serving wine in the old Juan Chavez house, reflecting the rich history of the property.

LOS RANCHOS HISTORICAL SOCIETY UPDATE

The Los Ranchos Historical Society's invited talk *In the End We are All Just Stories: The Magic of New Mexico Writer Rudolfo Anaya* has been rescheduled. The new time is Saturday, March 15, 2025 at 1:00 PM.

In preparation for the talk, Cindy Sylvester and Gordene MacKenzie visited Pastura and Santa Rosa NM where Rudy was born and grew up. They also interviewed his cousin and a friend.

In November, Sue Kaplan Lentz gave a talk *Nat Kaplan: A Builder in Harmony with Nature*. It was accompanied by slides of her father's work and took place in a Nat Kaplan house.

Stay tuned. We have two exciting speakers lined up for the New Year: Dr. William Carlton on the *History of Modern Agriculture in New Mexico* and expert David Montoya on the *History of the Ditches in the Village*.

Much more at losranchoshistoricalsociety.org.



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