

50 YEARS OF GHOST RANCH

STORIES, LAND REAL TREASURE OF LANDMARK

Story by Robin Jones

Photography by Craig Varjabedian

In the 1800s, there was Rito del Yeso, where the notorious Archuleta brothers lived. According to rumor, travelers who were invited up to the little house up by the Abiquiú mesas were never seen again. The area became known as El Rancho de los Brujos—Ghost Ranch—and the treasure the brothers were supposed to have amassed has never been found.

Arthur Pack, the last sole owner of the ranch wrote: “Perhaps the real treasure of Ghost Ranch was something far different from hard or soft mineral, or from the beauty found there by Georgia O’Keeffe, or from the new knowledge of ancient life discovered by the paleontologist.”

And, perhaps, the real treasure of Ghost Ranch is the land and the stories of the land.

Drive up U.S. 84, some 40 miles past Española, and you’ll come to the entrance of Ghost Ranch. The dirt road curves up and around sage-covered mesas, piñon trees and cactus. To your left, you see three or four curious burros watching you. On your right, you pass what looks like an old log cabin where people are gathered painting. You could imagine cowboys settling by the log cabin at sunset. However, the cabin is modern. Billy Crystal had it built for the movie *City Slickers*, the movie where three friends go on a cattle drive to

find themselves. Ghost Ranch liked the cabin so much they kept it.

You can’t see the canvases of the painters but there’s no need. The picture is right in front of you: the flame-colored cliffs and rocks, the shining stone that inspires and captivates, the endless forever of the horizon—streaked by clouds and light. We’ve seen these hills before. Georgia O’Keeffe painted them. O’Keeffe offered the world a new sensibility in viewing the desert. This was no barren wasteland to her, but a rich and fertile source for the imagination. Because of O’Keeffe, Ghost Ranch is known worldwide.

The drive winds farther up, and signs on the road ask you to slow down, in Burma Shave stanzas, until you come to a large alfalfa field. Guest David Sinclair and his dad remember that alfalfa field. “At sunset, Dad and I were out in the alfalfa field with a baseball and bat,” he says. “All the other guests were setting up chairs and getting ready for a meteor shower. We were their entertainment. Dad would hit fly balls out to me and I’d go racing through the alfalfa to field them. All the folks sitting would applaud. It was a little two-man baseball game for them. And then when it was dark, the stars fell.”

At night, the noises from the ranch range beyond the cabins. Sometimes you can hear Mozart flute sonatas.



Perhaps the most prominent landform at Ghost Ranch, Chimney Rock stands as a beacon that draws visitors to the landscape’s mesas and canyons. Towering more than 500 feet above the desert floor, Chimney Rock can be seen from almost any place on the ranch.



One of the favorite hiking destinations on the ranch, Kitchen Mesa during the 1930s and '40s was referred to as "Ice Cream Rock."



While it looks as if it's been here forever, this log cabin was actually built for the 1991 film *City Slickers*, starring Billy Crystal. The ranch staff liked the cabin so much they asked the film's producers to leave it after the film was completed.

Sometimes Native American drumming. Sometimes singing, talking, poetry recitations, storytelling, just plain laughter. In his memoir, *We Called it Ghost Ranch*, Arthur Pack recalls his first night at the ranch: "That night under a black-velvet heaven blazing with stars that seemed so close that one might almost reach up and touch them, Carol (Carol Bishop Stanley) told us tales of how the Spanish *conquistadores* first came from Mexico ... we spread our bedrolls outside under a pair of great cottonwood trees ... the cliffs surrounding us cast a shadow in the moonlight, and across the arroyo a pair of great horned owls hooted again and again."

When there is finally quiet, when everyone sleeps, the wind rustles the leaves of the cottonwoods. The same wind sighs up the trails to Chimney Rock and Box Canyon, and over the red hills where O'Keeffe painted the rocks, trees, flowers and bones of the West. But other bones were here first: the bones of the first Spanish conquistadors, Hispanic settlers, and the warring tribes of Ute, Navajo and Apache. Before them, the Tewa lived up on the Pedernal—the flat-topped mesa of flint,

the one Georgia O'Keeffe claimed as her own, before the Tewa, the lost culture called the Anasazi. And before them, the dinosaurs: *coelophysis*—a smallish quick moving carnivore from the late Triassic period.

It's been a conference and retreat center for exactly 50 years. From the early 1920s on, it was a dude ranch owned by Carol Bishop Stanley. Stanley was a piano-playing Boston socialite who loved the West and moved on out and married a cowboy. Stanley and her husband, Richard Pfaeffle, started a dude ranch near Alcalde. They added El Rancho de los Brujos, gained through a winning poker hand (or so Pfaeffle claimed). When Arthur Pack, a conservationist who started *Nature Magazine*, came out to visit, he was overwhelmed by the beauty of the place. He bought into the ranch and became Stanley's partner.

Many of the dude ranch visitors were famous and rich: Mabel Dodge Lujan, Mary Cabot Wheelwright, Charles Lindbergh, the Rockefellers, the Johnsons, Leopold Stokowski, Gary Cooper and John Wayne. The crowd

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Ghost Ranch is a land that shows millennia of time and beauty and has been inhabited by dinosaurs and dudes, ranchers and rambler, artists and archaeologists.

Weekend Celebration at Ghost Ranch

SATURDAY, OCT. 1

1-3 p.m.

Slide show/lecture by Lesley Poling-Kempes followed by a book signing of her new book titled *Ghost Ranch*, published by The University of Arizona Press.

2-5 p.m.

25th anniversary open house/reception at the Florence Hawley Ellis Museum of Anthropology celebrating the dedication of this museum.

For more information on the anniversary weekend activities call (505) 685-4333, (877) 804-4678 or logon to www.ghost ranch.org.

—Robin Jones

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of guests assured the Ghost Ranch of success.


When the Pfaeffle and Stanley marriage broke up, Stanley sold her share of the land to Pack. He relished his role as the sole owner. For him and others, the ranch became more than a place for relaxation. It became a place of study. Pack experimented with cattle ranching and soil and plant conservation, and he flew in antelope from Arizona and Wyoming to repopulate the plains of Ghost Ranch. While guests rode horses and hiked the canyons and trails, paleontologists began excavations in one of the nearby talus slopes, after the discovery of a mass of dinosaur bones.

During World War II, the ranch closed temporarily, open only to a small group from nearby Los Alamos. It turns out this group, who remained fairly private, were the developers of the Manhattan Project. Getting away from the arduous pressures of their task, they basked in the beauty and hospitality of the Ghost Ranch.

The ranch reopened after the war. By the 1950s, Arthur Pack and his second wife, Phoebe, were spending more of

their time in a new venture in Arizona. Wanting to preserve and protect the land, Pack approached the Presbyterian Church and, in 1955, the Ghost Ranch was given to the church.

The ranch may be owned and operated by the Presbyterians, but it is open and available for all. Not only does the ranch offer many workshops, seminars and classes, it also hosts educational programs from other institutes and groups. It has overnight accommodations, meals, a bodywork program, the Florence Hawley Ellis Museum of Anthropology, the Ruth Hall Museum of Paleontology and a trading post.

The treasure of the Ghost Ranch may be the celebration of learning, the possibility of community, the glories of the past, or the imagination and beauty gifted by artists. The conference center promises the respite and safety to find that treasure, in ourselves. Start with the land and go from there. 

Robin Jones lives and writes in Santa Fe. She and photographer Craig Varjabedian are working on a book of photographs and stories about Ghost Ranch, to be published by University of New Mexico Press.



Cerro Pedernal is the landform that appears in many of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings. "It's my private mountain, it belongs to me," she said. "God told me if I painted it enough, I could have it." After her death, O'Keeffe's ashes were scattered on top of "her mountain."