It's a Mud, Mud, Mud, Mud World

A community digs up dirt on the Nateso Pueblo--and finds itself in the process.

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Last week Richard Sharkey and Maurice Dominguez got a heater going outdoors and hoped the weather would hold, because there's no point in working with adobe in the snow or rain: The mud never stops being mud. The elements cause enough damage after an adobe structure is complete, as is evident inside the remaining buildings of the Nateso Pueblo. "This structure we're standing in was almost destroyed," Sharkey says. "Rain poured down out of the roof, and at one point--one recent point--animals were living here."

The roof that was falling apart has been rebuilt with new, hand-peeled vigas, and the walls have been shored up with adobe bricks sent from New Mexico. The dirt floor and corner fireplace still look as though animals are in the neighborhood, but soon--maybe when the weather clears for good, maybe this summer--they'll be repaired, too. Restoration of the Nateso Pueblo is a never-ending project.

Its ongoing supervisor is Sharkey, a student of adobe construction for the past 22 years who describes himself as "a man on a constant quest for knowledge." He is also the kind of man who speaks earnestly of structures--as opposed to houses--and admits to getting hopelessly tangled in the arcane details of home repair.

"I give myself away too much," he says. "Before this job, I was building custom staircases for $3 million homes in Vail, and I got into big, big money problems. But I still think, I could put in a nice little curve right here--"

"And I have to say, Richard, no," says Dominguez, who describes himself as "a poor black child. Well, a Kiowa-Apache, okay? I grew up all over the Southwest." To learn adobe construction, he explains, "all I had to do was watch my family."

Like Sharkey, Dominguez spent much of his childhood in the Colorado foothills. But until recently, he had never heard of Indian Hills, the unincorporated mountain community thirty minutes from downtown Denver where the Nateso Pueblo is located, much less the Pueblo itself.

This is a common ignorance, if a relatively new one.
"You've never seen anything like it!" shouts a Nateso Pueblo brochure from 1953, a few years into a short-lived attempt to revive the circa-1925 tourist attraction. "See a real Indian pueblo! All roads lead to interesting, educational, historic INDIAN HILLS! At Indian Hills Pottery this summer you will see the famous team of Wo-Peen and his wife Juanita, internationally known potters!"

The brochure also promises native dances, "an unconquerable way of life, which persists today, in contrast to a tired, atomic world," and "many thousands of tourists," most of whom were imaginary even then.

For much of the past forty years, the Pueblo has been left to quietly crumble back into dust. If Dominguez has his way, though, the buildings will be back in business this summer. "There's a gentleman in Pennsylvania who might pay to have youths come here from reservations in South Dakota," he says. "I want to teach them about building adobe homes. We'll have a forge and a kiln, work custom doors and windows, peel vigas. It'll be a regular school--"

"And I'm not sure I agree with it," Sharkey interrupts. "Why should this school be for just one type of person? I think it should be open to everyone. Adobe is used all over the world--"

"All over the world," Dominguez agrees.
"It's cheap and efficient, and it has a high R value because the walls are so thick--"

"But the government doesn't want us using it because--"
"Uh, Maurice," Sharkey interrupts, a tone of mild exasperation in his voice. But it turns out that he, too, thinks adobe, flat roofs and all, has a rightful place in the Colorado mountains. "If we hadn't kicked the Spanish out, Denver would look like Santa Fe," he theorizes. "It all has to do with prejudice against the Spanish--"

"Uh, Richard." Dominguez's turn. "We've contacted the restaurants in Indian Hills," he offers. (There are two: Indian Hills Espresso and the Wild Man's Cabin.) "We're hoping they'll agree to provide lunches for the students."

"It's a vision, you see," Sharkey says. "It's all tentative."
"I want to build a prayer lodge," Dominguez says.
"But we'll ask the community first," Sharkey cautions. "The community is very important."

The most important members of that community, at least for Sharkey and Dominguez, are Judy McWilliams and Rosemary Aitkin, the Pueblo's current owners. They live in the already rebuilt half and are financing the rest of the restoration--one way or another. "I play the lottery a lot myself," Aitken quips.

McWilliams, until recently a systems engineer, is between jobs and spends much of her time enjoying her collection of Southwestern art and artifacts and puttering around and about the house, adjusting its big and small details: the stack of blue-glass plates, the straw hats on the wall, the woodsy trunk designed to hide the copy machine. Aitken, who is a carpenter at the Tattered Cover's LoDo branch and inherited McWilliams's father's tools after he died, prefers outside work. Most afternoons she gardens or patches cracks in the stuccoed walls, stopping every once in a while to exchange construction ideas with Sharkey and Dominguez.

As the weather improves, the two men are spending more and more time at the Pueblo, and their vision for its restoration gets grander and grander. McWilliams and Aitken, on the other hand, seem content to let plans evolve organically. An adobe school, a kiln to be used by themselves and any Indian Hills potters who happen by, maybe a bed-and-breakfast--it all sounds good to them.

"Everyone who's visited us here says there's a peace about the place," McWilliams says. "It's hard not to be affected by it."

"And every single part of it has been added onto or chopped off or altered in some way," Aitken says. "Where our garage is now, there was a church where they actually said mass, and a kiva, too. Whoever lived here has always been somewhat eccentric."

Aitken and McWilliams brought their own quirkiness to the place seven years ago, when they bought it from a high-school art teacher. McWilliams had been planning to move to Santa Fe until she saw the Indian Hills version. Aitken had lived in the same Denver house for more than twenty years, but she sold it to finance her half of the Pueblo. Once the two women moved in, they surrendered to Indian Hills life.

"Our garden became a salad bar for elk," McWilliams recalls. "We stopped going out much. We liked being at home. Indian Hills is a very different place."

"More redneck," Aitken offers.
"No, that's not it. It's only about half redneck."
"It's a genuine community," Aitken agrees. "Evergreen--places like that--they're just places to live."

At first Aitken and McWilliams kept to themselves. Then Aitken began working on the Indian Hills Community Plan, a University of Colorado-sponsored study attempting to solve the area's longstanding water and zoning problems. And then when the Pueblo "began falling down around our ears," McWilliams recalls, Aitken extended her research. She started talking with longtime residents and reading up on the origins of Indian Hills.

As it turned out, Indian Hills was one of the many pet projects of George W. Olinger, the Denver mortuary magnate. Envisioning a summer colony for rich city dwellers, complete with comfortable log cabins carefully designed to look rustic, a golf course and a clubhouse, Olinger bought some 2,000 acres of mountain land in the foothills southwest of Denver in 1925. He gave his new development an Indian theme, naming all the streets after tribes from North and South America At the entrance, he built a log-hewn soda fountain known as HoChaNeeStea, or the Chief's Inn.

"The pulsing finger of the Great Spirit," exclaims an early Olinger advertising brochure, "the spot chosen, with unerring instinct, by primitive tribes of nomadic red men for their homing place...The UTES discovered Indian Hills first. Thereafter, for many, many years, their jealous possession of the enchanting spot caused bitter feuds with the Arapahoes and Cheyennes."

The sons and daughters of the homesteaders who settled the area in the 1860s must have found Olinger's revisionist history amusing. Although it's possible that an occasional Native American summered near Indian Hills, it's unlikely that any fights broke out over this early Eden. Local historian Helen Brush has a more succinct view of the Indian's role there. "Now that the Indian was safely confined on the reservation," she writes, "he could be used as an advertising gimmick."

In the absence of any native natives, Olinger imported some genuine Indians. This was accomplished by calling on the services of noted French ethnographer Jean Allard Jeancon, who persuaded artisans from the Navajo, Tesuque and San Idelfonso tribes to move to Indian Hills and build a traditional pueblo. (NAvajo, TEsuque, San IdelfonSO--hence "Na-te-so.") After their construction project was completed, the Indians stayed on to dance and make pots for tourists, some of whom took the long bus trip from Denver to see their "quaint arts and crafts...An excellent opportunity is afforded for observation of their primitive life and habits," an early Olinger handout notes. "One may see how they work, play, worship and bring up their families."

At least until the stock market crashed in 1929. After that, there were few Denver families with enough spare cash to maintain summer homes, let alone a tourist attraction.

The Pueblo sat empty for the next nineteen years until Willard Spence, a Denver minister, decided to revive it. Spence had traveled through the New Mexico pueblos and become obsessed with pottery, which he called "the poetry of the earth." With his wife and two daughters, he moved into the Pueblo in 1949 and soon began making his own pots for the grandly named Indian Hills Pottery company.

And on the off chance that the tourist trade might be resurrected, Spence invited a family of San Idelfonso Indians to spend summers in Indian Hills making traditional New Mexican vessels. Luis Gonzales, also known as Wo-Peen, had lived at the Pueblo as a child in the late Twenties; now he returned with his sister, Rose, and his wife, Juanita, and their three children.

Once again, however, Indian Hills pottery proved a rather slight tourist draw--particularly when compared with such attractions as the "world-famous Tiny Town" railroad, located just four miles away. When Spence left in 1953, he turned over his business to Lyn Beardslee, a fellow artist, who kept the Pueblo's kiln going for five more unextraordinary years.

And then the disintegration really began. Some locals recall a loosely knit group of hippies, along with a handful of domesticated animals, occupying the Pueblo in the late Sixties. After that there was art teacher Ron Metzler, who rebuilt the main house and threw a few pots but left in 1990, when his marriage broke up.

Then came McWilliams and Aitken, who are convinced of brighter days ahead. So convinced, in fact, that they brought to a recent supper at the Indian Hills Community Center not only an enchilada casserole, but a display of Pueblo photographs and Richard Sharkey to explain them.

Sharkey was not the only audio-visual aid on hand. A slide show of Indian Hills' origins featured a picture of local celebrity Chief Evergreen Tree in the Twenties. Although his own tribal origins were obscure, the chief would dress in full Plains Indian regalia and, with a pine tree painted on each cheek, travel the dirt roads of Indian Hills on the running board of an old roadster, occasionally offering bird calls.

Brian Lang, curator of Evergreen's Hiwan Homestead Museum, was also in attendance. He asked for donations of Indian Hills pottery for an upcoming exhibit, and also asked anyone who knew anything about the Pueblo to call him. He was new to the history of Indian Hills, he explained, and starting from scratch.

According to Lang, the concept of staring at live Indians as entertainment was not as bizarre in the mid-Twenties as it sounds now. "America was fascinated with the Indian," he explains. "The noble savage, as it was called, and the exotic, the other. There was nothing weird about the idea."

In fact, Lang himself continues to be fascinated by it. His office is so crowded with historical stuff--from old lard cans to fragile deerskin moccasins--that he sometimes can't find a place to sit and has to go work in the kitchen. Lately, most of his work has focused on the Nateso Pueblo as a historic tourist attraction.

A special shelf in his office is reserved for the two dozen or so samples of Indian Hills pottery he's collected for the exhibit set to open this August. A few of the pieces are traditional designs crafted by Wo-Peen and Rose and Juanita Gonzales, when they were priced at $2.95 in 1950s dollars. Most of

them, however, were made by Willard Spence.

"Spence was a lot more interested in glazes than forms," Lang explains. "Sometimes he'd just buy a piece of pottery and make a mold out of it to practice glazes on."

This could explain the three-inch squirrel attached to an ashtray and covered with a lumpy, mottled glaze. More accomplished Spence pieces have exploded crystals or bits of pyrite embedded in their surfaces. They represent the very humble beginnings of a potter who, when he died in Taos this January, was eulogized as a master of "an ox-blood glaze perfected in China more than 500 years ago."

"He was also a prolific poet," Lang adds. So, as it happens, was Jean Allard Jeancon, who brought the first Indians to the Pueblo in the Twenties. "I've just gotten a bunch of Jeancon's poems, in manuscript," Lang says proudly. "I've had to be a detective."

Lang's research also led him to two elderly women who lived at the Pueblo as teenagers. "One told me the kiln was called Big Bertha," Lang says. "She took three days to heat up and four to cool down, and Lyn Beardslee would keep her going for six days at a time, not even sleeping, when he had to fire his pots. Wait till Rosemary Aitken finds out about that!