

THE OLD SANTA FE ASSOCIATION THE EARLY YEARS

By John Gaw Meem 1974

Incredible as it may seem The Old Santa Fe Association will be fifty years old just two years from now. It seems appropriate therefore that I, the last surviving participant should say a few words about that event and some of those in subsequent years. Not as history (I have not consulted the minutes) but by recalling some of the items that have stuck in my memory and in my old files.

It is interesting to note that our Association was founded very close to the actual spot where we are meeting tonight, in fact just at the entrance to St. John's campus where the Seminary is, which used to be Sunmount Sanatorium. I lived there as a part-time patient back in 1926 and attended the meeting at which O.S.F.A. was founded. It was attended by fifty or more people and was called by Dr. Frank Mera, head physician of Sunmount, to protest the action of the City Council in offering to give or to sell any lands it might own east of Sunmount to a group representing 3,000 Texas club women. They intended to erect homes and an auditorium to form a Colony or Chautauqua for summer use. The indignation of the meeting was not directed so much at the large number of Texas ladies, but at the prospect of a development which would change the character of Santa Fe.

Under the leadership of attorney Francis Wilson (to whose vision we owe so much) the Old Santa Fe Association was formed and that night I participated in the formulation of our famous "objectives" which are still on our masthead: *"To preserve and maintain the ancient landmarks, historical structures and traditions of Old Santa Fe, to guide its growth and development in such a way as to sacrifice as little as possible of that unique charm, born of age, tradition and environment which are the priceless assets and heritage of Old Santa Fe."* The final wording of this statement was arrived at with the help of many of those present, including Mary Austin and Frank Applegate who were skilled with words.

Following the founding of O.S.F.A. its first action was to draft a petition to the Mayor and City Council of Santa Fe, emphatically disapproving of the proposed establishment of a cultural colony to be built on land owned by the City and requesting a new hearing. The list of signers to this petition is a roster of the people that helped to make Santa Fe the kind of city it is. The Council rescinded its action, resulting in a victory for the first endeavor of the Old Santa Fe Association.

Strange as it may seem it is nevertheless true that after such a successful beginning we lapsed into a long period of inaction, lasting for nearly twenty years. I have often asked myself why this should have been. One probable answer is that during those years there was a strong popular sentiment in favor of the revival of the so-called Santa Fe style of architecture which tended to reassure people. It was during those years that many large buildings were constructed, such as the large addition to La Fonda, the Laboratory of Anthropology, the County Court House, the City Hall, the High School, the Presbyterian Church, and Cristo Rey, to mention only the ones I was connected with. The city was

obviously developing its native styles, the Fiestas were healthy and definitely stressed local customs, and we were not overwhelmed by the automobile, as yet.

Also, many of us were participants in a strong movement for the restoration and preservation of New Mexico mission churches under which such churches as the ones at Acoma, Laguna, Zia, St. Anna, and Trampas were restored and the Santuario at Chimayo, which was falling into ruin under private ownership, was bought and given to the Catholic Church. The same group was concerned about the magnificent castrense reredos stored in the Cathedral and as a result of their interest Archbishop Gerken authorized its installation in Cristo Rey.

But O.S.F.A. came to life again around 1945 under the pressure of increasing automobile traffic problems. The Highway Department had determined to build an inter-urban, multi-lane highway through Santa Fe following a route along the Santa Fe Railroad yards, along Jefferson Street and then east of Rosario Cemetery to join the existing road to Taos. This aroused alarmed opposition led by a revived O.S.F.A. under the leadership of Inez Sizer Cassidy on the grounds that such an elaborate design was not needed but especially because it would leave a tendency to divide the Angles on the east side from the Spanish Americans on the west side. O.S.F.A. appealed to the Archbishop who announced his opposition to the highway on the ground that too many houses of poor people would be destroyed and because of war shortages would be too costly to be replaced. And with that the Governor decreed the road would not be built.

In the meantime, the City Planning Commission, of which I was then Chairman, had engaged Harland Bartholomew and Associates to produce a Master Plan for the city, including the best location for a highway by-pass and Zoning Ordinances. The Master Plan was completed in 1948 to which O.S.F.A. had contributed \$2,300 for the purpose and thus participated in one of the most important steps in the orderly development of our City.

Of equal importance was the passage in 1957 of the "H" Historic District Regulations as a modification of the Zoning Ordinances which more than almost any other factor has helped to maintain our City's individual historical quality. The text was drawn up by Oliver LaFarge and Irene vonHorvath, members of the City appointed committee for the Preservation of the Santa Fe Character. Irene was not only a member of O.S.F.A. but for several years a Trustee of our Association.

In the battle that occurred prior to its adoption a public meeting for its consideration was held in St. Francis Auditorium sponsored, I believe, by the O.S.F.A. The principle argument of the opposition was that to limit the design of buildings in any area to an historic precedent would stifle creativity and lead to mediocrity. Also that it was probably unconstitutional. The latter was brought to a test in 1961 in a case brought before the Supreme Court of New Mexico involving the limitation of the size of window panes if not under a portal. The decision in favor of the Historic District Regulation was a landmark in the history of preservation for it ruled that an aesthetic requirement enacted for public good was as valid as a safety or health regulation.

Speaking of struggles, one of the most memorable occurred when we tried to save the Nusbaum Building. It stood on the east side of Washington Street about opposite where the Santa Fe National Bank is now located. It was a large, two-

story Territorial style adobe with a graceful two-story portal across its whole front; set back about fifteen feet from the sidewalk with a little garden and lovely trees to shade it. And it was truly historical. Among its visitors shortly after the Civil War was General U. S. Grant. If ever a building should have been preserved that was it. But no, the City Council, under pressure from the Plaza merchants, decided to tear it down and make a parking lot of it, which it now is. The O.S.F.A. put on an intense campaign to save it. As a result of propaganda \$25,000 was raised and offered to the City if they would make it an annex to City Hall with a smaller parking lot in the rear. But... nothing doing. The building was torn down and forever lost.

Another unsuccessful fight, but which attracted much sympathy and approval for the Association, was the effort to prevent the new Post Office Building from being constructed on the site it now is on west of the Federal Building. It was obviously far from the center of town, in fact it was at that time on the northern edge of it. Furthermore the site on which it was to be built was a natural forest with beautiful large trees which would have made a magnificent park. We circulated petitions to save it which were signed by thousands of people (over 4,000, I believe). The answer finally came from Senator Anderson to whom we had urgently appealed and he said, "No. The Government owns the land and the Post Office will be built on it."

But the O.S.F.A. didn't always lose. In 1961 it bought the Borrego Building which, as you know, is one of Santa Fe's loveliest and oldest Territorial buildings. It was measured and drawn up by the Historical American Buildings Survey and the plans, back in 1940, were deposited for record in the Library of Congress. The building was beginning to fall apart, especially the postal from the front walls and obviously needed attention. So, when the building came up for sale a special drive was put on for gifts and about \$18,000 was raised which with a loan of \$10,000 (without interest) enabled its purchase. In the meantime arrangements were made to rent it to the Three Cities of Spain who have occupied it ever since, thus producing the necessary funds for its maintenance (an essential item in the art of preservation).

It was at this time that O.S.F.A. became acutely aware that it was severely handicapped by not having the privilege of receiving tax exempted gifts. We retained attorneys Watson and Watson to advise us on how this might be done. As a result it was determined that O.S.F.A. should remain free to use propaganda to influence legislation wherever necessary and to create another organization to be called the Historical Santa Fe Foundation who would not engage in such propaganda and thus would be free to receive tax free gifts. In other words, O.S.F.A. was to be the fighting front for the historic preservation of Santa Fe and H.S.F.F. would be the holding organization. This seems to be working out and if all goes well the Tully House, another truly historical and lovely building, will be saved by H.S.F.F. The latter has also been instrumental in helping to restore the Loretto Chapel.

Back in 1956 the Old Santa Fe Association was involved in one of the most important acts of preservation in its history. It was discovered that the area surrounding the intersection of College (now Santa Fe Trail) and DeVargas Street and west of it, known as the Barrio Analco, was in danger of destruction by

expansion of the proposed extensions of the capitol campus. In other words the block west of San Miguel Church all the way to the Supreme Court Building was being considered by the Capitol Improvements Commission as potential building sites for future state buildings. This would have been a tragedy of major proportions since it is one of the oldest historic sites in the City, This is where, after the Reconquest, the Tlascalan Indians who came with Onate from Mexico were settled, close to San Miguel Church where they could worship.

Needless to say the Association appealed to the Governor to protect the area. At the same time a map was drawn by us of the area that should be kept inviolate as "the Barrio Analco." As a result of O.S.F.A.'s efforts and the cooperation of the National Park Service, the planning was stopped and the area has since been declared a National Historic Site and is inviolate.

There are so many episodes one would like to recall that it is hard to choose. But it is time to conclude so I'll just tell one more. It also has to do with the proposed capitol and a new State Library. The plans and elevations for these new buildings came to our attention and to O.S.F.A.'s dismay turned out to be ultra modern in design: the Capitol, round in plan, had alternating concrete and glass panels for the exterior. The Library was similar but elliptical in plan. We decided that since these buildings were to be erected in the Historic District that it was imperative that they be changed to conform with the Historic District regulations. But how to achieve this since the State was not obligated to observe the City's requirements? Our quandary was solved when a hearing was called to consider the new capitol. The O.S.F.A. membership turned out en masse to the astonishment of Representative Mershon, the Chairman. We made speeches in protest, but when the hearing was over we left thinking our cause was lost.

But a few days later Governor Campbell told us that if the Association was so keen for a change they had his permission to work with the architect towards that end. This was a little difficult as I, an architect, was chosen as O.S.F.A.'s representative to do the negotiating. The Capitol Architect, Mr. W. C. Kruger, was very gracious and cooperative, but a solution was not easy as the circular plan had to be kept since all the office spaces had already been allocated with the Senators and Representatives cooperation and therefore only the facade could be changed. The result, as you know, is no masterpiece (to put it mildly), but it did represent a triumph for O.S.F.A. in its effort to preserve the integrity of the Historic District.

And so, I thank you very much for listening to these reminiscences. But before I close I want to give these folders to your Chairman, Saul Cohen. They contain the long lost original documents of Incorporation dated May 29, 1926 and the amended one of February 20, 1946. They were in Francis Wilson's file for the DeVargas Development Corporation which were transferred at some time to Elizabeth White's files. When the corporation assets were bequeathed, to the School of American Research they were surprised to find folders marked Old Santa Fe Association and that is how I got them and I'm delighted to pass them on to you. Thank you.