

## **the new house is an old home**

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"[Doc Udell's] now retired, but in the old days when you needed him you had to go and get him. If he wasn't at his home, you waited in the living room of his neighbor—who happened to be a fortune teller. Doc owned his house, two suits, three pairs of boots, an eight-year old car and a hunting gun. He also owned his own soul."

-- Taos author Tricia Hurst, New Mexico Magazine, October 1977

A dubious acquisition, some muttered about the old adobe hacienda we just bought in downtown Taos. A unique opportunity, a realtor commented. Lots of potential.

When taking a first walk-through, two things strike you about the place: its vast chaotic layout, and its paint. In room after room, garish blues, attacking oranges, and electric greens assault the eyes. Who would paint their house like this? You can't help but wonder. It feels like I just walked through four different houses, said contractor Mark Goldman when he inspected it for us.

Its recent history was not good. The place had been neglected for some time, and after being purchased as a foreclosure in 2009, was not substantially improved. At the time we encountered the house in late 2013, it was unoccupied, and had been on and off the market for a few years.

A dubious acquisition indeed. Yet something enticed. Underneath the gawdy veneer hid good bones and rich history, I knew it. Underneath the cheap trappings was a deep and rooted sense of place. Someone once took great care of this home, I realized. Someone once cared about materials and details and quality. It was worth a second look.

When we returned a second time, we gazed beneath the superficial tackiness to find its original nature. When we returned a third time, we brought a plumber and an electrician and a roofer and a builder, to make sure we knew what we were getting into. And when we returned a fourth time, we kindled flames in the fireplaces and spent the night in sleeping bags, wandering the rooms in firelight, imagining its first inhabitants, listening to its noises.

It was a gradual unveiling, and our patience paid off. Under bad paint we found eternal adobe bricks, handmade on site from local earth. Covered by a depressing dark stain we saw massive hand-peeled vigas and beautiful latillas, harvested from Taos Canyon. Inset next to cheesy lamp fixtures in the thick walls we discovered deep nichos and sunken bookshelves, waiting for saints, books and candles. Under cracking parquet flooring hid hardwood planks, locally milled. Next to a newer section of drywall stood two massive wooden posts, brought

seventy years ago from Taos Pueblo. Side by side with cheap kitchen cabinets we uncovered intricately carved drawers and lintels, designed by a sure hand.

But whose sure hand? Who built these ten rooms with seven fireplaces? As we spent our first night in the home, we read by candlelight a handwritten note from the builder's daughter, an old woman who grew up in this house, someone we'd never met who wanted to share some history with whomever might next live here.

Isaac Udell first came to Taos in 1924 where he practiced medicine from 1930 to 1965. The daughter writes that Doc Udell came to Taos with his first wife, but, frankly, "she did not like the harsh life and left...he later married my mother Irene Dalzell in the 1940's and moved her to Taos." They lived in someone else's house first while building their own home.

The daughter remembers specific attributes of her dad: "My father had a deep baritone voice. He was very strict with his five children.... [He] loved Taos. He loved its people, their fellowship and gentle ways. He was honest, moral and very kind. He made certain we always had a fine home. He knew good horse flesh and loved to ride, although he seldom had time."

He was a perfectionist, a fastidious man who ironed his own socks and underwear. He seems to have rarely slept, if ever, and seemed driven beyond most men. "Many times he would get a [doctor's] call and lose the work he had just done. He kept going with dogged determination the likes I have yet to see elsewhere. Some mornings, we would wake up and our father had torn out a whole wall he wanted moved a few feet!"

Although demanding and hardworking, he was also deeply compassionate. "Patients would stop him in the store with a complaint," she writes. "He would write them a prescription on a piece of paper and give them the few dollars he had. When he got to the register he had no money. It was awful. And yet happened often."

She also remembers details of home construction and of life in Taos:

They made adobes on the spot. When the first room was complete we all moved into it the first winter. Every summer he would add on. He never slept that I can remember. He was up building by himself many mornings. He had two sawhorses with logs on them which we all took turns peeling with a sharp draw knife. These [logs] he would roll into place with wooden poles used as levers. Once in place, he and my three brothers used an old bumper jack on one end. They would jack up one end, put adobes under it for support, move the jack to the other end, repeat, until it was roof level. He was also a midwife and had to

drive long distances to deliver babies. He delivered 3,300 babies during his time in Taos. He never lost one. Because he was a chiropractor he never crippled one. He would get paid in apples or meat or whatever folks had. [Sometimes folks would] clean our house or work on it. He eventually built a room as an office. He performed chiropractic duties in the room toward Holy Cross Hospital. He never delivered a baby in our house.

He was a great artist and sculptor and worked so hard on the house. We never had the money to do much at a time. He would send us to Randall's Hardware store several times a day or as the few dollars he made came in. We bought all kinds of things in little increments like tar, roofing tacks, nails and such. Every summer we played on the roof and jumped off into the mound of straw he kept for adobes. He would scold us and tell us not to. He would go on a baby delivery and we consistently disobeyed and ran on the roof. Every winter we would gather all the pots and pans for the leaks we had caused. We finally stopped our roof escapades after several years.

He loved his house. I can still see him in the little patio on his hands and knees troweling the walk of fresh cement. He was so proud of his little lawn and clipped it on hands and knees with rusty little clippers. The lilacs are the ones [Arthur?] Manby had given him. Dad planted the saplings when they were as big around as a pencil. I see him with a trickle of water from our sorry well [2 gal]. he hand dug the well. Once in a while he would reel my sister [she was the smallest] into the well in a bucket to check the depth of the water.

My father did 90% of the work on the house himself. He gathered rocks for the foundation. Mixed cement in a wheel barrow one bag at a time. He mixed the mud one batch at a time, adding straw until it was perfect. Growing up in a bakery [in Raton, NM], he of course had many fine metal cookie sheets which he cut up to make decorative metal for carved cabinets which he did all the work. He used tin snips—most difficult as the metal was thick. These metal cookie sheets that we used on kitchen cabinets were designed to resemble the olden day trastaduras. A nail was driven into the metal...punched into traditional designs. They all had names. The trastadura was a little cage on a rope lowered into water well shafts to keep food cool and rat free.

He got the planks for the living room floor rough-hewn from Pot Creek Mill. Later, in 1960's, someone tried to give him some railroad ties. He rejected these cold. Not good, he said. All

timbers came from Taos Canyon. The wooden posts in his office with the holes in them are gate posts from Taos Pueblo.

In the candlelight, reading his daughter's recollections of her father, the home he built and the Taos he loved, I yearned to know more about this man Udell. Like his hand-crafted house, his life story had fallen into my hands. His labor and his legacy, hidden under bad paint and decades of neglect, was coming, patiently, to light.

Who was Isaac Lamoreaux Udell? As I scratched the surface of history to answer this question, I discovered much more than I expected: Not only was the creator of our new home a skilled healer, midwife, builder, and woodworker; I found he was a writer and painter as well, who through word and image provided an intimate, passionate insight into the secret world of the Penitentes of northern New Mexico.

In early 1969, writer John R. Milton edited and published a book-length compilation of the writings of Isaac ("Doc") Udell. These hundred printed pages sprung from Udell's writings and paintings from the 1930's, and had never before been published.

"This amazing man," writes Milton of Udell, "who worked as a chiropractor in Taos for many years and, without a medical license, delivered thousands of babies, also wrote about and painted huge pictures of the Spanish sect known as Los Hermanos Penitentes, outlawed from the Catholic church for practicing flagellation and a kind of crucifixion."

In the introduction to the compilation, Milton tells the story of how he discovered Udell's writings while living in Taos for a year: "I stumbled upon his manuscripts by accident, secured them through a friend, and got permission to publish them. Rick Jason, the movie actor, who had known Udell in the military service, wrote an appreciative introduction, and I wrote a biographical sketch from the information in Udell's letters."

The compilation, entitled "In the Dust of the Valley," was published as a quarterly issue of the South Dakota Review in 1969. In the 1984 work *The West and Beyond*, Milton recalls Udell's compiled writings were "printed to look more like a book than a magazine, and it sold out quickly. Because of the photographs, the drawings, and the expensive color on the cover, we could not afford to reprint. This valuable historical document resides, perhaps unnoticed now, in only nine hundred libraries and private collections."

My own attempts in 2014 to locate Udell's "In the Dust of the Valley" confirmed Milton's assessment that the compilation was socially significant, largely unnoticed, and historically precious. The words below are typical of the description provided by those few sites claiming to have a copy of the work:

Spine bottom and top chipped, corners a little bruised.  
An extraordinary book.  
Out-of-Print.  
Extremely Rare.

In the 1930's Isaac Udell described the Penitentes of Northern New Mexico, along with the land and people of Taos, in both words and in paintings. The March 27, 1969 issue of The Taos News announced that the Millicent Rodgers Museum was showing thirteen large oil paintings by Udell which represented a historical documentation of the "Penitente Brotherhood of Northern New Mexico." The newspaper noted the thirteen paintings portrayed the mysterious and often misunderstood Penitente tradition "through the sympathetic and understanding eyes of Dr. Udell, long time friend of the people. First shown in Denver in 1950, the paintings have... traveled as far as South American countries, and are now back in Taos, their original home."

In my new old home, I touch the massive traditional roof beams above me, the foot-thick walls at my side, built by Doc Udell seventy years ago. I think of the man writing and painting in these very rooms, expressing his deep appreciation of Taos and his deep respect of the Penitente culture. It is clear that Udell, an Anglo doctor, became a transplant deeply rooted in the ancient values of this land and its people. The place became part of him; the people became part of his own. Introducing "In the Dust of the Valley," editor John Milton describes Udell's connection to his adopted home:

The reality of Taos puzzles and offends those visitors who look only for the values of industrialism and modern technology. The visitor often...feels that the world of Taos is out of the running, is archaic, is foolish nonsense. It is the intuitive person who gets inside Taos, understands it, and learns to love it as well as fear it. Such a person is Doc Udell.