

## Resurrecting Udell

Compiled by Todd Wynward when first relocating to this home, Easter 2014

Who was “Doc” I.L. Udell, the remarkable man who built this house by hand? He had no easily labeled profession; neither did he have an easily-labeled personality. As I dig through history to bring his life to light, I’m finding him to have been a force of nature— elemental, contradictory, unable to be ignored. In this house, the vibrancy of his life and craft shine through despite decades of dust and overcoats of garish paint.

Collecting adjectives to describe Udell almost forty years ago, editor John R. Milton captured the following words from letters and interviews with those who knew him: tremendous, intense, impulsive, dedicated, tender, brutal, dynamic, modest, appalling, compassionate, creative, prejudiced, awe-inspiring, gentle, striking, humble, strong.

Who was Doc Udell? Primarily, observed Milton, Udell should be defined as a man who left a contribution. His was a conscious life of authenticity and new birth, uniquely integrated with the people and the place of Taos. For those of us who now live in the house he built, who seek to live a lifeway markedly different from that of the dominant culture around us, Udell offers us a path to follow. Like us, he was by no means perfect, yet he embodied eight values we aspire to live by.

**Repentance.** “Change your life!” is the prophetic command one must follow to unshackle from pervasive dominant culture. Udell took this mandate seriously. He was a skilled doctor, a talented artist, and a credentialed member of the military-industrial complex who undoubtedly could have achieved possessions, power and prestige in a big city. Instead, he chose a life of service, creativity and solidarity in the remote high desert of Taos, defecting from a frenzied society he felt was obsessed with “values of industrialism and modern technology.”

**Recovery.** In Taos, Doc Udell found a supportive parallel society operating very differently from the self-advancing society of modern America. The village of Taos grounded Udell, acted as a community of recovery and support that allowed him to escape the addictions of affluenza. Instead, he joined in a society of reciprocity, and crafted a life marked by “simple doing and giving.”

**Resistance.** Udell despised the consumerism that modern America preached. He railed against tourists with dollars who were charmed by ‘the old Taos,’ yet unconsciously demanded that “all this must be changed for me, for my comfort and status.” Resisting the pull of capitalist success, Udell replaced the American dream of self-advancement with his own dream: to give himself to his people and his environment. Udell stated his philosophy of life in clear terms: a person’s worth “should be measured by the excellence of [one’s] profound endeavor for

the benefit of Collective Man," i.e. one's lifelong and tireless efforts to promote the common good.

**Redistribution.** Doc Udell knew he was blessed, and so became a blessing. Udell seemed born to serve the community he loved. His daughter recalls he would often be stopped in the store by patients in serious need. He would not only write them prescriptions on the spot, but would give them the few dollars he had, only to find he had no money for himself when he got to the register. Sharing his talents and resources without a second thought, Doc Udell drove long distances to deliver over 3,300 babies in the Taos area, often "getting paid in apples or meat or whatever folks had."

**Reverence.** Doc loved Taos. As Milton writes, "he loved its people, their fellowship and gentle ways." He rooted himself in reverence to this unique place, allowed it inside of himself, and bonded with "these land-oriented people who look up to the mountain, up to the sky, out to the high plains and the black buttes and the huge crack that is the Rio Grande Gorge."

**Re-placement.** When Udell first came to Taos in 1924 he felt he'd found his true home. Udell built this house by hand, the old way. He gathered local rocks for the foundation. He made adobe bricks on site, mixing the mud one batch at a time, adding straw until it was perfect. Roof timbers were harvested from Taos Canyon, and peeled with a draw knife. Planks for the living room floor were acquired rough-hewn from nearby Pot Creek Mill. The wooden posts in the office are gate posts from Taos Pueblo. All of this, along with his intricate hand-carved details found throughout the house, practically shout his deep sense of place, even seventy years later.

**Resilience.** Midwife, healer, builder, artisan, storyteller, Doc Udell was both an exemplar of--and believer in--community resilience and reliance. He built this home the way Taosenos always have. Walls a foot thick of native earth, keeping the home warmer in winter and cooler in summer. Heat came from the bright winter sun and from wood harvested nearby. When electric refrigerators weren't available or affordable, Udell's daughter remembers *trastaduras*, metal cages on ropes Taosenos lowered into well shafts to keep food cool, clean and rodent-proof.

**Restraint.** Like generations of Taosenos before him, Udell adapted his needs to the local environment, rather than expecting the local environment to adapt to his infinite needs. He actively resisted America's cult of conspicuous consumption. A Taos folk historian recalled the doctor as a man who valued a few useful possessions: he owned his own home, two chairs, three pairs of boots, an eight-year old car and a hunting rifle. And, she concluded, "he also owned his own soul."