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BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

It Takes a Village

A traditional farming community thrives within a modern-day metropolis

BY GUSSIE FAUNTLEROY

In early 2004 the Los Ranchos de Albuquerque mayoral election was down to the wire, with candidate Larry Abraham ahead by a hair. When a recount was called, the results held: Abraham took the contest by four votes. Eleven years later, it might be hard to imagine the well-respected, 61-year-old mayor—since then twice reelected—earning his post by such a slim margin. Yet at the time many did not share or understand Abraham's ideas for the North Valley community, a semirural pocket of agricultural tradition and rich history surrounded mostly by the urban landscape of greater Albuquerque. As it turned out, the mayor's goal was both effective and astute: preserve the community's beloved age-old character by running its government like a cutting-edge, 21st-century business. >



Los Poblanos Historic Inn & Organic Farm, as seen from the air. Opposite: Guests at Los Poblanos enjoying a meal prepared on site and served under the grand portal at the La Quinta Cultural Center, originally the property's ranch house. In 1932 former owners Albert Simms and his wife, Ruth Hanna McCormick Simms, commissioned John Gaw Meem and numerous WPA artists and craftsmen to renovate the ranch house, with gardens designed by Rose Greeley. La Quinta served for many years as the center for the Simms' cultural and educational initiatives.



The Los Poblanos lavender fields. The plants' essential oils are extracted using a steam distillation process, and those oils are then used in a line of specialty products offered to guests of the farm. Opposite: The bucolic beauty of Los Ranchos de Albuquerque is one of the main attractions of the village.

Today it is hard to find disagreement with Abraham's vision among the 7,000 Los Ranchos inhabitants, a comfortable mix of families with deep-rooted ties to the land, business owners, entrepreneurs, retirees, and those with the means to enjoy high-end properties along such cottonwood-lined stretches as Rio Grande Boulevard. Before his election, the sense of identity and pride of place that motivated the village's incorporation almost 60 years ago had gradually faded through growth and development. Now it is once again alive and strong.

A significant reason for that shift has been a concerted push to brand Los Ranchos as a separate entity with its own distinctive history and character. Thanks to the efforts of Abraham and others—in particular, business owners who hopped on the mayor's bandwagon—the village is establishing itself as a destination while working hard to preserve its semirural beauty and charm. “Businesses and residential can go hand-in-hand, as long as we keep the integrity of our sweet little

village and what makes us different, as long as we uphold the beauty of the village and what we hold important,” says Cherie Montoya, owner of Farm & Table restaurant.

Montoya grew up in Los Ranchos, in a family of North Valley ranchers and self-sufficient home gardeners reaching back more than 200 years. Born in 1970, she remembers as a kid playing along the ubiquitous tree-lined irrigation ditches that wend their way through the village as part of an extensive system built by the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District in the 1920s and '30s for drainage and flood control from the nearby Rio Grande. For at least two millennia prior to that, despite periodic flooding, the area was a riparian oasis of small agricultural settlements, first by ancient Pueblo Indians and their ancestors and later by Spanish colonists.

Between 1850 and 1854, the small plaza of San Jose de Los Ranchos briefly served as the Bernalillo County seat, and many residents still consider the present-day

village the “heart and soul of Albuquerque,” as Abraham puts it. On an even more fundamental level, it is the shared and precious resource of water that sustained settlement in the first place and that still “holds everybody together,” Montoya says.

As Albuquerque's population rapidly grew and spread after World War II, residential and commercial development began encroaching on North Valley farmlands. To protect the area's rural feel, local residents, including then-Bernalillo County Commissioner Edward Vail Balcomb, incorporated Los Ranchos de Albuquerque in 1958. Located seven miles north of downtown Albuquerque, the village's 4.4-square-mile area is bounded on the west by the Rio Grande and extends roughly to 4th Street on the east, Ortega Road on the north, and Dietz Farm Road on the south. Even after incorporation, however, the sense of place that once defined the community continued to be diluted. While its denizens knew they lived in a special place, residents and businesses

routinely used Albuquerque as their address, and most described themselves simply as living in the North Valley. Then Larry Abraham decided to run for mayor.

Abraham's own family roots run deep in New Mexico's agricultural tradition. His grandfather owned a sheep ranch in Socorro County and a general store in Magdalena, where Abraham's mother was born. Abraham grew up in Santa Fe and earned a business degree from the University of New Mexico Anderson School of Management. Based in Albuquerque, he went on to establish and run more than 15 successful businesses in fields including furniture, banking, construction, real estate, and cell phone service, and earned induction into the Anderson School's Hall of Fame. In 2001 he fell in love with a 13-acre property in Los Ranchos and settled there.

During the mayoral campaign three years later, a number of longtime Los Ranchos residents wondered if the newcomer really understood the community's traditional culture and sense of place. One of those residents was John Calvin, nephew of former County Commissioner Balcomb. Now 61, Calvin grew up in

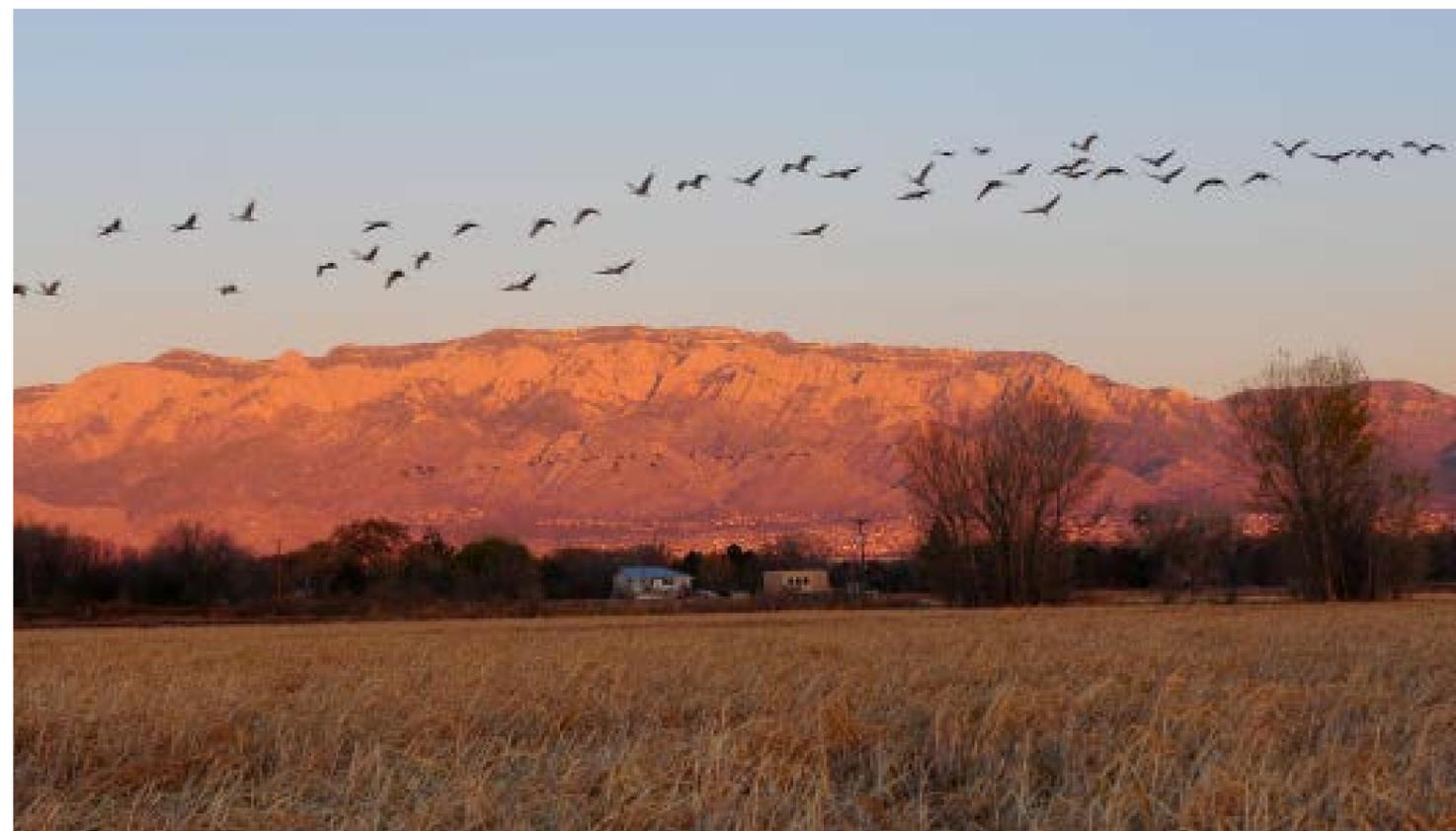
The village has purchased more than 50 acres, which along with adjacent land owned by Bernalillo County and the City of Albuquerque, has created some 200 acres of contiguous open space.

Los Ranchos as the “only gringo kid” in the then-tiny village. After living in Spain, Morocco, South America, and throughout the western United States, Calvin returned to Los Ranchos in 1982 and purchased property on Chavez Road NW, about a mile east of Rio Grande Boulevard, which was slated for housing development. There he started a vineyard that officially opened as Casa Rondeña Winery in 1995. Although Calvin had reconnected to his childhood home, his wine bottle labels initially described the award-winning winery's location as Albuquerque. “We didn't have the vision Larry had, and he has proved us completely

wrong,” Calvin acknowledges now.

That vision encompassed what in fact was a clear appreciation of the area's special character, along with the acute business and managerial sense to preserve and promote the village for the benefit of residents and local businesses. The mayor's first goal was a deliberate rebranding of the village, aimed not only at those outside Los Ranchos but also toward its residents. In particular, he strongly promoted use of the full name, Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, in all correspondence, village descriptions, business letterheads, publicity, and everyday use within the community. “He gets mad if you don't have Los Ranchos on your return address,” jokes longtime resident Mike Godwin, owner of Ernest Thompson Furniture and Southwest Spanish Craftsmen (located in Albuquerque, not far from Los Ranchos). “At first I thought, what's the big deal? But I've seen what it's done, and now I'm one of Larry's biggest supporters,” Godwin says.

As a village trustee in the early 1990s, Penny Rembe was part of an earlier effort to help the village by obtaining a separate Los Ranchos zip code. Rembe and her



THIS PAGE AND OPPOSITE: COURTESY LARRY P. ABRAHAM; PREVIOUS SPREAD: PAGE 94, SERGIO SALVADOR, PAGE 95 COURTESY OF LOS POBLANOS HISTORIC INN AND ORGANIC FARM.



John Calvin, owner of Casa Rodeña Winery, located in the heart of Los Ranchos. Opposite top: Family-owned-and-operated Dan's Boots & Saddles has been a fixture in the village since it was established on 4th Street in 1970. Opposite bottom: Farm & Table restaurant and its owner, Cherie Montoya.

family own and run Los Poblanos, a 25-acre historic property on Rio Grande Boulevard, in the heart of Los Ranchos. The property includes an award-winning historic inn, lavender fields, and formal gardens, and is among the most-visited and well-known destinations in the Albuquerque area. Like Abraham, she and a few others recognized the community's

need for a clear identity, especially because without it, the village was losing gross receipts tax revenue to the City of Albuquerque. "No one knew we needed to code a sale to Los Ranchos rather than Albuquerque," she explains. While the zip code initiative was not successful, Penny and her husband, Armin Rembe, applauded the mayor's achievements along the same lines.

Los Poblanos itself is intimately intertwined with the history and culture of Los Ranchos and the state overall. Part of a 1716 land grant, the property housed the 800-acre ranch of U.S. Congressman Albert Simms in the early to mid-20th century. In 1932 the congressman's wife, Ruth Hanna McCormick Simms, commissioned renowned New Mexico architect John Gaw Meem to renovate the historic ranch house and create La Quinta Cultural Center, now part of Los Poblanos Inn. The structure is "one of New Mexico's invaluable treasures," according to

James Moore, former director of the Albuquerque Museum.

The property also played an important role in the area's agricultural history as a model experimental farm in the 1930s and '40s. In 1976 the Rembes purchased the property and moved their family there. Since then, the La Quinta building, along with the old milking barn, hay barn, 1930s-era greenhouse, and other historic structures have been preserved. "This whole time it has been a historic preservation project," Rembe says.

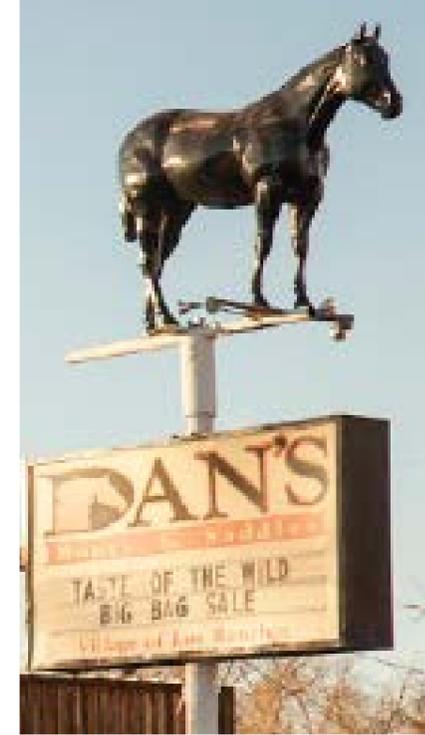
Agriculture and commerce intersect at Casa Rodeña Winery as well, with its lush vineyard, spacious cottonwood-shaded grounds, fine handcrafted wines, and Andalusian-inspired architecture designed by the vintner-owner himself. (Over the past 25 years, Calvin has also set a high standard by designing and building some of the village's most beautiful high-end homes.) The winery draws oenophiles to Los Ranchos from around the country

COURTESY OF CASA RONDEÑA WINERY (2), OPPOSITE: BONCRATIOUS (TOP), AND SERGIO SALVADOR (2)

and beyond. It has named its flagship 1629 wine and private club in honor of the year the first wine grapes were planted in North America, smuggled in by Spaniards, and planted south of Socorro, near present-day San Antonio, NM.

Even before Mayor Abraham and the push to reestablish Los Ranchos' identity as an oasis in the midst of a high-desert cityscape, lifelong resident David Montoya was doing his part to preserve the community's rural character. Twenty years ago, Montoya, a contractor and local small-scale rancher, purchased ten acres off 4th Street to save them from development. Today he raises cattle on eight of those acres, while the other two, leased and farmed by Aimee Conlee and Ric Murphy under the name Sol Harvest, produce vegetables and herbs—all of which end up on plates in the adjacent and aptly named Farm & Table restaurant. Montoya's daughter Cherie opened the restaurant in 2012 with a menu that changes with seasonal availability and also draws on other local and regional farms, ranches, and dairies.

Montoya's property is thought to be the site of a former stagecoach stop along



Thanks to the efforts of Mayor Larry Abraham and others, Los Ranchos de Albuquerque is establishing itself as a destination while working hard to preserve its semirural beauty and charm.

the historic El Camino Real trade route, which ran from Mexico City to just north of Santa Fe from 1598 to the late 1800s. Fittingly, the trail's path through the North Valley approximates what is now 4th Street, the nearly 10-mile-long city street along which lies Los Ranchos' main commercial district. It is lined with small businesses, many locally owned. Some have grown to near-iconic status. Sadie's of New Mexico, for instance, is considered by many to serve some of the best New Mexican food in the city—and many a local remembers snagging a chile fix at the now-defunct 4th Street bowling alley that served as the restaurant's first home.

Another long-standing landmark is Dan's Boots & Saddles, established on Central Avenue in 1953 by Dan Christensen as a boot, saddle, and Western wear shop. Feed and farm equipment were later added, and in 1970 the store relocated to 4th Street. Today it is owned and run by Dan's grandson, Larry Christensen, who has been involved in the family business since his teens. Christensen notes that, over the years, as Los Ranchos property values have risen and horse ownership has become more





expensive, the number of horse owners in the village has dropped. Consequently, the store's horse-related business now draws from a larger geographic region. Most local customers these days come for small-animal feed, Western wear, and other Western lifestyle items. Yet Christensen continues to enjoy the character of

4th Street and is dedicated to keeping the business in Los Ranchos. After commuting from Albuquerque for many years, his family is remodeling a house in the village they can call home.

One of the newest North 4th Street businesses is Vernon's Hidden Valley Steakhouse, opened by Vernon and Angel



Sadie's of New Mexico's owner Betty-jo Stafford with Mayor Larry Abraham. Top and left: some shops along 4th Street, the focal point for business in the village. Opposite: Vernon's Hidden Valley Steakhouse owners, Michael Baird (bottom row, middle) and his wife, Kim (at his right), surrounded by their staff.

TOP AND LEFT: BONCRATIUS. RIGHT: COURTESY OF LARRY P. ABRAHAM



Garcia in 2007 and purchased two years later by Los Ranchos residents Michael and Kim Baird. Because the location lies outside central Albuquerque, it's less ideal for a business, Kim observes. But with strong marketing and an excellent staff—coupled with efforts to promote Los Ranchos as a destination—the restaurant draws a diverse mix of locals and travelers alike. “The village has made great strides. They’ve made it easy to brand it as a Los Ranchos business,” Kim says.

One key to the Los Ranchos turnaround is a commitment by the mayor and his staff to operate village government like a business. In the early 2000s, Village Hall was virtually volunteer run, with relaxed book-keeping and little professionalism. “The finances were very poor when we took over,” Abraham says. “Bank statements were not reconciled. The books were a disaster.” Since then the situation has reversed. As of late 2014, the village had almost \$8 million in reserves. Abraham hopes to use some of that money to purchase additional open space and to revitalize the 4th Street district. The village's 2020 Plan proposes roundabouts, sidewalks, new lighting, and

SERGIO SALVADOR

other changes to make the street safer and more pedestrian friendly.

At the same time, the village government has demonstrated its commitment to preserving the area's rural character. Since Abraham took office, low-residential-density zoning has been enacted, along with such ordinances as fence and property-wall height limits to preserve views. A 280-foot setback was reinstated along the historic section of Rio Grande Boulevard. Farm-yard animals, backyard gardens, orchards, and small farming operations are welcome within village limits.

Also during Abraham's tenure, the village has purchased a total of more than 50 acres, which along with adjacent land owned by Bernalillo County and the City of Albuquerque, has created some 200 acres of contiguous open space. Home to a variety of wildlife, including wintering sandhill cranes, the open space also features walking and biking trails, riverside access, expansive views, and a lush feeling that recalls the area's farming roots.

Of the land now owned by the village, 23 acres that once housed Anderson Valley Vineyards currently hosts the village-run

Agri-Nature Center, which each summer operates a farm camp open to children in grades K–5. The five-day-long camps, held four times in summer and once in spring, involve kids in raising vegetables, herbs, and flowers, and learning about farm animals.

Locally grown produce as well as farm and garden products from around the region end up at the Los Ranchos Growers' Market, one of the largest in the state. Averaging 50 vendors (plus arts-and-crafts sellers) each week between May and mid-November, the market symbolizes the heart of the village's agricultural spirit. In addition, such local events as Casa Rondeña's annual harvest and grape stomp and the village's annual Easter egg hunt and Lavender and Garlic Celebration bring folks together in celebration and fun. A short drive away from this village atmosphere are all the services and urban amenities one could want. “I think it's ideal,” says Abraham. “It's close to everything and it's a spectacular place to live.”

“The beauty of this place will continue to be preserved with forethought and care,” adds Calvin. *