

# SOUTHWEST SOJOURN

The rehabilitation of the hotel La Posada preserves not only architect Mary Colter's masterpiece, but a lavish emblem of a bygone age.

By Kim A. O'Connell

After 75 years, the story has acquired the whiff of legend, meant to be told time and again. In the high desert of Winslow, AZ, two cowboys rode their horses right into the new hotel called La Posada, cutting a dramatic swath through the group of people assembled there. In one sweeping move, they picked up a small woman and set her on the lobby counter, before firing their guns and riding away.

This episode is emblematic not so much of the wildness of the West but the wonder of it. The cowboys were celebrating the opening ceremony of the grand Spanish Colonial hotel, the crowning achievement of the Fred Harvey Company and the Santa Fe Railway, which had long partnered to provide rail travelers with high-class accommodations. Its architect, Mary Colter – the woman so theatrically deposited on the counter – had rendered the hotel in bold architectural moves and exquisite decorative details. With its long arcaded walks, filigreed grillwork and low profile, La Posada was an Old Mexico “rancho” transplanted to the American Southwest – designed to make Winslow the gateway community to the Grand Canyon and Arizona's other desert attractions.

But for all the exuberance and optimism of that opening day in 1930, the timing was off. The hotel had opened just seven months after the stock market crash, which led the nation irretrievably into the Depression, followed by World War II and the rise of automobile travel. Although the hotel survived and even thrived for three more decades, the seeds of its demise had been planted before it was even built. Colter would suffer a similar fate, her architectural legacy becoming as dusty and forgotten as some of her works. Yet with a



resurgence of interest in Colter and the recent preservation of La Posada, this remarkable architect and her most elaborate project are experiencing a rebirth.

## A Complex and Authoritative Woman

By the time she was 11, Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter had already lived in four states. After Mary's birth in Pittsburgh in 1869, the Colter family moved to Texas and Colorado before settling in St. Paul, MN. Always a keen and curious girl, Colter loved art and artifacts, particularly treasuring a gift of Sioux drawings. When her mother later burned all the Indian pieces in the house for fear of smallpox, Colter secreted her drawings away, later calling them her “most priceless and precious possession.”

Colter's interest in art eventually led her to the California School of Design, where she studied art and design while apprenticing in an architect's office. Knowingly or not, she had positioned herself in the vanguard of a burgeoning architecture movement. In addition to being a rare woman working in a man's field, Colter espoused the growing belief that American architecture should be “of the site,” as Frank Lloyd Wright advocated. This meant repudiating the dominance of European traditional architecture in favor of more vernacular styles that reflected the American landscape and spirit.

Over the course of her life, Colter would design many structures meant to house, feed, inspire and entice travelers. Not just banal hotels, gift shops and dining rooms, to Colter these spaces were also opportunities to engage the mind and the senses. She infused her architecture with wide-ranging notions of history and art, while grounding it in indigenous materials and forms. “She was a master of the properties and

Above: In 1892, 23-year-old Mary Colter held a degree from the California School of Design and had begun teaching art in Minnesota. Over the coming decades, she would apply her art and education background to her architecture projects for the Fred Harvey Company, telling the many stories of the American Southwest. *Photo: The Mary Larkin Smith Collection, Grand Canyon National Park* Below: La Posada would be the crowning achievement of Colter's fruitful partnership with the Fred Harvey Company, which built dozens of hotels, restaurants and modest lunchrooms along the Santa Fe Railway. Built to resemble a rambling home that had been added on to over the years, the hotel has an asymmetrical floor plan with several wings for various functions. *Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.*





Colter imagined La Posada in Winslow, AZ, to be the abandoned hacienda of a wealthy Mexican don. With its tiled roof, filigreed ironwork and low profile, the Spanish Colonial building resembles an Old Mexico "rancho." Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.

artistic use of stone and brick, wood and tile, iron and glass, and textiles..." writes Arnold Berke in his seminal biography, *Mary Colter: Architect of the Southwest*. "She treated structure and site as intertwined halves of a single composition, merging them with almost obsessive precision, yet assuring that their synthesis appears far from contrived."

Colter was a complex and authoritative woman when such women were often questioned and disliked, maybe even feared. Wearing dusty pants and a hat, she would ride horses through the Southwest sketching Indian ruins, but she also collected and wore fine specimens of Native American jewelry. She joined a progressive women's club that discussed politics, social issues and art, and she positioned herself to meet other people at the forefront of their fields. Although the exact circumstances are unclear, Colter's meeting with the Fred Harvey Company would prove particularly auspicious.

### The Harvey House Phenomenon

In the early-20th century, weary rail travelers were happy to stop at one of the more than 80 Harvey Houses, the hotels and restaurants that were built from the late 1800s on along the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railway. As a 15-year-old immigrant from England with only two pounds in his pocket – or so the legend goes – Fred Harvey started learning the restaurant business as soon as he arrived in the United States. Two decades later, Harvey had partnered with executives at the Santa Fe Railway to provide food and accommodations along its fledgling railway route. At the time, rail travel had a reputation for shady service. After paying for it in advance, passengers often choked down greasy or rancid food, served on cracked plates and dirty tables.

Harvey envisioned a higher class of rail travel. In 1876, he opened his first operation with the Santa Fe company – a second-floor

On the flagstone terrace of La Posada's Sunken Garden, Colter installed a lion head fountain that dripped into a stump of petrified wood, which was readily available near Winslow at what is now Petrified Forest National Park. The Sunken Garden was recently restored as a classic Mediterranean outdoor room. Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.



lunchroom – in its Topeka, KS, depot. Other establishments soon followed all along the route, in Kansas, Illinois and Louisiana – but most were centered in the growing Southwest, from Texas to California. The Harvey Houses quickly became renowned for their top-notch service and high-quality fare. One 1888 menu, for example, offered whitefish with Madeira sauce and peas au gratin, topped off with pie, ice cream and French coffee. Just as memorable were the Harvey Girls, crisply clad in black and white uniforms. Made famous by Judy Garland's musical of the same name, the Harvey Girls were women of manners who waited on patrons with precision and grace – traits that often led to marriage proposals from the railroaders, miners and cowboys who were passing through town.

"In the late 1880s and 1890s, the Santa Fe Railway used itself as a way to promote the Southwest and used the Southwest as a way to promote itself," says Sacramento resident Richard Friedman, a railroad enthusiast who has developed a comprehensive web site on the Harvey House phenomenon ([www.harveyhouses.net](http://www.harveyhouses.net)). "The company built these large hotels in places that quickly became tourist traps or that they wanted to become tourist traps."

Colter was a natural fit for the Fred Harvey Company, which held an appreciation for regional history and culture while steaming forward into the 20th century. When the company announced that it needed someone "who knew Indian things and had imagination" to decorate the Alvarado Hotel in Albuquerque, Colter was an obvious choice. Over the course of her career, Colter would design several Harvey Company structures, most notably at the Grand Canyon – including Hopi House, the Watchtower at Desert View and Bright Angel Lodge – as well as hotels such as El Navajo in Gallup, NM, and La Posada in AZ. She consulted on the expansion of the La Fonda hotel in Santa Fe, and she led the interior decorating for this and other projects. In all cases, she zealously researched traditional and vernacular precedents – not to exactly replicate the past, but to fuel her imagination.

### An Abandoned Hacienda

Creative from the first, Colter often invented a fanciful backstory that would inform her designs, so that hotel patrons would immediately feel like they had stepped back in time (while being offered the most modern conveniences, of course). At La Posada, Colter imagined the structure as the abandoned hacienda of a family of Spanish Basques, who built the ranch in a wild landscape of Indian myths. As La Posada's current owners describe the fantasy, subsequent generations of wealthy dons added guest rooms and gardens, as well as art and furnishings from around the world. When the stock market crashed in 1929, however, the last don was forced to sell the compound to the Santa Fe Railway, leaving at dawn with two parrots perched on his shoulders.

As befits a structure that had been lovingly expanded through the decades, La Posada is asymmetrical, with a two-story main section flanked by a collection of wings and punctuated by a modest tower. Made of poured reinforced concrete and clad in stucco, the 72,000-sq.ft. hotel is replete with rustic Spanish Colonial touches, including a parabolic entrance arch, pitched Spanish-tile roofs with short overhangs, a balcony framed in heavy timber and wrought-iron railings and grillwork. The south façade faces the railroad tracks, anchored on the east by the one-story Santa Fe railway depot, which is attached to the main building by a square-columned passageway. The west wing, with its guest rooms, frames a sunken garden for which Colter had designed a formal landscape plan (never implemented because of the failing economy). The north side of the hotel faced Second Street, or Route 66, the highway to the west "that's the best," according to the famous song.

La Posada's interior is lavishly decorated in a mélange of styles and objects, emphasizing the impression that this was once a family home. In the hotel lounge, whose ceiling was painted turquoise, travelers could rest on



tapestry-covered divans. In niches and on shelves stood eclectic examples of jars and vases, some Spanish in origin, others from China and Japan. Framed mirrors and pictures adorned walls, with Navajo rugs on the floor. "If these eye-catching pieces all looked old and rare," Arnold Berke writes, "then she succeeded in her clever historical deception, for many of them were in fact new." In blending contemporary and classic details at La Posada and elsewhere, Colter is credited with inspiring the style known as Pueblo Deco. As in traditional pueblo architecture, La Posada exhibits rounded forms and arches, yet Colter's details are crisp and smooth-surfaced – "almost



Although the bones of La Posada evinced a rustic simplicity, Colter filled the rooms with a lively amalgam of indigenous and exotic art and furnishings, an eclectic mix that the hotel's new owners emulated in their restoration. *Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.*



Colter helped to define an emerging style known as Pueblo Deco, which combined the rounded forms and arches of pueblo buildings with the streamlined crispness of the Deco and Moderne architecture of the time. *Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.*

Left: In a long hallway known as the Cinder Block Court for its exposed walls – the connector between the lobby area and the guest rooms – Colter amassed several distinctive furniture pieces and decorations that invited guests to linger over a book or a good conversation. *Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.*

Modernist in countenance," according to Berke. The earthy nature of her work also inspired the rustic architecture that came to prevail throughout the national park system, he says.

"We take this Southwest vernacular stuff for granted now, but Colter was building it in the early-20th century," says Allan Affeldt, who purchased La Posada in the 1990s. "She hires Hopi masons and travels the Southwest to learn traditional construction techniques. She's taking a traditional building form, this great Spanish hacienda, but she's using modern building techniques, mixing the best of both."



For the ongoing rehabilitation of La Posada, owners Allan Affeldt and wife Tina Mion, along with their partners, have uncovered original walls, reinstated long-lost furniture, and in some cases crafted new pieces in the spirit of Mary Colter's vision. *Photo: Mark Boisclair Photography, Inc.*

Right: As Colter biographer Arnold Berke asserts, La Posada stands with only one other structure at the pinnacle of Colter's long and distinguished career – the Watchtower at Desert View, overlooking the Grand Canyon. Inspired by the architectural relics of ancient Native American civilizations, the Watchtower offers visitors a profusion of art and images, as well as breathtaking views of the canyon beyond. *Photo: Mike Quinn, National Park Service*

Below: Working closely with Colter, Hopi artist Fred Kabotie painted many images related to Hopi origin legends and Indian life in the Watchtower's interior. Looking up through the first and second parapets of the tower, the ceiling features reproductions of ancient images found on the Abo caves in New Mexico. *Photo: National Park Service*

As hoped, La Posada quickly became the center of social activity in Winslow, hosting weddings in the lounge and numerous civic and business meetings. Throughout the coming years, celebrities often stopped there, including aviators Howard Hughes and Charles Lindbergh and movie stars Clark Gable and Errol Flynn. But, like the Golden Age of Hollywood itself, La Posada's glory days would not last.

### Uncovering the Past

When Fred Harvey died in 1901, he was hailed in his eulogy as a "benefactor" whose "spirit still lives." Indeed, the company would continue in Fred Harvey's name through the Great Depression and into the 1960s, although with each decade it lost ground to an increasingly car-dominated society. As the Harvey Company faded away, so did the Harvey Houses. In 1957, Colter's El Navajo hotel in Gallup was demolished, less than a year before Colter's own death in January 1958. In 1970, Colter's first Harvey project, the Alvarado Hotel, followed suit, dealing early, grievous losses to the emerging historic preservation movement.

By the 1980s, Colter's last big project for the Harvey Company, La Posada, was facing a similar fate. Twenty years earlier, it had been converted for use as offices for the Santa Fe Railway, which later merged with Burlington Northern. Route 66 had been abandoned in favor of the new Interstate 40 to the north, so tourists and travelers had less cause to come to La Posada anyway. The hotel's ornate walls and ceilings were covered to make room for mechanical systems, and many of its furnishings and artwork were auctioned or otherwise disposed of. Eventually, even using the hotel as office space proved untenable for the railway, and rumors abounded that it would be shut down for good.

Determined to save their local treasure, preservationists Janice Griffith and Marie LaMar formed a group called the Gardening Angels, giving talks and tours to drum up interest in La Posada. Their outreach efforts eventually attracted the attention of the National Trust for Historic Preservation, which included La Posada on a list of both threatened and saved structures. This in turn alerted Allan Affeldt and his artist wife, Tina Mion, to La Posada's plight. Affeldt had chaired an architectural think tank in southern California and was captivated by the region's architecture. After falling in love with the hotel and its remarkable history, both real and imagined, Affeldt entered into three years of negotiations with various agencies to clear the environmental, legal and financial hurdles presented by the site. In 1997, Affeldt, Mion and Affeldt's partner Daniel Lutzick successfully purchased La Posada and moved in. Their goal was a complete rehabilitation of Colter's vision for the building, which they would reopen as a working hotel in November 1997.

Initial rehabilitation work included opening up divided-up spaces, removing more recent additions from the original walls and bringing back original furnishings wherever possible. When this wasn't feasible, the team commissioned new works based on documentation and historic photographs. Yet modern changes have been made as well, including a state-of-the-art kitchen, new ground-floor public bathrooms and accessible spaces. The original woodwork of the hotel's former newsstand was rebuilt, which now serves as the reception desk and gift shop cashier stand. Mion also created a new glass "Mural of the Saints" for the hotel, an homage to Colter, who had chosen two patron saints for La Posada. A tile mural of San Pasqual, patron of feasts, once hung over the dining room, and wood-block prints of San Ysidro, patron of farmers, hung in every guest room – but all were destroyed or sold during the office conversion.

"The rehabilitation is a blending of old and new," Affeldt says. "My objective was not to put it back exactly as designed. We've tried to keep her volumes and sense of space, but bring the uses into a contemporary, ideally economically functioning space. All of Colter's works were architectural fantasies. She used her buildings to teach people about the story of the Southwest. She created this imaginary family and built this imaginary hacienda. Even in her day, it was very eclectic."



### A Masterful Job

The rehabilitation of La Posada continues, incrementally, to this day. Rather than be turned off by the ongoing work, Affeldt says, hotel patrons are captivated by the story and appreciate witnessing La Posada's rebirth firsthand. As word of the rehabilitation got around, Affeldt and his partners started receiving numerous stories from former hotel patrons, Harvey company employees and Winslow residents, as well as an outpouring of historic photographs, which proved enormously helpful to the restoration. A particularly revealing gift was the original floor plan for La Posada, long thought to have been lost.

Calling the rehabilitation "nothing short of remarkable," Friedman notes that La Posada is the only Harvey House that has been restored to its original use. "It's the kind of place where it's hard for people of ordinary means to envision just going to a hotel and wanting to sit there for a few days," he says. "That's the kind of feeling you get from being there. You want to pull out a book and relax, or if you're a rail fan, you want to go sit outside by the railway. They have done a masterful job."

The restoration of La Posada is helping to sweep in a new appreciation for Mary Colter and Fred Harvey, forever intertwined in the history of hospitality. Although some Harvey Houses are still in danger of being lost, others, such as El Garces in Needles, CA, and El Vaquero in Dodge City, KS, are being rehabilitated as museums, theaters and other community uses.

After slipping into obscurity in the 20th century, Colter is also now being lauded as the visionary she was. Colter was inducted into the Arizona Women's Hall of Fame in 1984 and was the subject of a slim but much-needed biography in 1980, which was followed by Arnold Berke's more comprehensive and lavishly illustrated volume in 2002. This year, Colter's Hopi House at the Grand Canyon is celebrating its 100th anniversary. That event, along with the ongoing work at La Posada, should ensure that Mary Colter's legacy is forever etched in the stone of the Southwest, which fueled an imagination as wide as the unending sky. ♦

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