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Frank Applegate

By MARY AUSTIN

THE publication of Frank Applegate's last book, *Native Tales of New Mexico*, brings him back to us as we knew him, kindly, humorous, keen, observant, and with the subtle feeling for folk-ways which more than any other trait distinguished him. And with it all the penetratingly simple quality of creativeness which was the least appreciated of his personal characteristics. It was all these things which drew me to him when in 1923 I became his neighbor in one of his little houses on the Camino Monte Sol, at Santa Fe; all these and in addition his satisfying neighborliness. There was a sympathy between us which had its root in a common derivation from rural Illinois and a not too unlike past. Through incidents of our common youth and the shared pioneer history we began to know each other, and it was but a step from that to the sharing of our common appreciations of the New Mexican life to which he had so newly come. He drew freely on my greater factual intimacy with that life, and I was helped in my interpretations of it by the communality of our approach.

Mr. Applegate's earliest point of contact with the West was Indian pottery, which he arrived at through his expert knowledge of ceramics, and his recent teaching experience at the pottery works of Trenton, New Jersey. He had also a native feeling for design, and a sculptor's experience which led him very quickly to an interest in the Spanish *bultos*. Our first conference on the subject had to do with a carved figure of Our Lady of Innocence, which I had recently secured from a morada at Abiquiu, which had been repainted with crude colors of house paint, which Frank undertook to show me how to remove, thus uncovering the delicate workmanship underneath. So we began to be interested in the whole question of the technique of the New Mexican images which he began to collect. Through this

we rapidly grew interested in all the old and almost dishabilitated arts of New Mexico, touched with a profound regret for their disappearance. In collecting old pieces, Frank had often recourse to native workmen for repairs, and by this means we came to realize that the capacity for handcraft, of a fine and satisfying quality, though overlaid by modern American neglect, had not completely disintegrated. We began to discuss the possibility of reviving it.

At that time I was extremely ill and not able to undertake an adventure of that dimension. But I was in need of some sort of going interest, if I was to recover, and also I felt that if we succeeded in getting such a movement started, friends of mine, in case of my death, would be interested in carrying it on. So I secured financial backing from my friend, Mrs. Elon Hooker, and at a meeting at the home of Miss Manderfield (one of the Oteros) a society for the revival of Spanish Colonial Arts was launched. We hung up for some time over the name, but I had already been hard pressed for a phrase by which to describe the descendants of the Spanish Colonists, other than the misleading term "Mexicans" and had already begun to write of them as Spanish Colonials. I remember insisting to Dana Johnson that the term was in public use, though I was myself the only person who had used it, and to my relief he took it up and began to popularize it. Spanish Colonial Art became a recognized subject of interested comment in the press.

We began that year holding a prize competition at the time of the Fiesta, although we actually knew of but one person who could be counted on for contributions. This was Celso Gallegos, the wood carver of Agua Frio. Actually we had but fifteen entries that year, but we sold Gallegos' carvings so liberally that we were able to turn over to him the sum of \$60. Frank took it to him in round silver dollars, and the old man was so overcome that he wept and tried to kiss Frank, which, in view of Frank's great length of limb, was not easily managed. We had, however, made a beginning, which we have improved upon from year to year, so

that the exhibition of Native Spanish Colonial Arts is now a recognized feature of the Fiesta. We had help from the rest of the community, but so long as he lived, Frank carried the burden of judgment and directive criticism. Very early we arrived at the necessity for a permanent collection of the best examples of the old work, and, as we had the means, to collect them and place them on exhibition in the rooms of the Historical Society in the Old Palace. Our earliest important piece was the altar and reredos from the old church at Llano, near Taos. Frank was notified that it was for sale, and went up immediately, arriving a little in advance of the curio dealers, and secured it for \$500. Other people began to contribute items. We were especially indebted to Miss Mary Wheelwright.

Our next important purchase was the Sanctuario at Chimayo. This interesting old family chapel of the Chaves family was now reduced to the ownership of three members of that family, and suddenly it was announced that options had been given on the beautiful decorations and furnishings, to curio dealers, who proposed to dismantle it. I was away at the time, lecturing at Yale University, but Frank wrote me promptly, and I was able to find a Catholic benefactor who made possible the purchase of the building and its content, to be held in trust by the Church for worship and as a religious museum, intact, and no alterations to be made in it without our consent. At the ceremony of reconsecration, Frank and I felt very close to each other. By this time, Frank's own collection of bultos, santos and old furniture had grown to considerable importance, so that we began to cast about in our minds for a way of establishing at least some memorial of it. It was when we came back from Sanctuario that we definitely decided on a much discussed project of writing a book descriptively accounting for the Spanish Arts in New Mexico, copiously illustrated.

By this time Frank had begun by my advice to write. His first venture was the transcribing of many amusing incidents which he had happened upon in his study of Indian

arts. He did not use the conventional story form, nor did I insist upon it. What I saw was that he had happened upon an explicitly folk form, which I encouraged him to preserve. The success of his first collection, which was published in a volume as *Indian Tales from the Pueblos*, was so gratifying that it led him to project another volume which should include all three of the native cultures of New Mexico: Indian, Spanish, and Anglo. He worked slowly, and he was at the same time much occupied in pushing the work of the Society for the Revival of Spanish Colonial Arts. We had opened a shop for the sale of work and had been asked to co-operate with the Normal School at El Rito in reintroducing these arts into their manual training department. We began to collect photographs of the best examples, having in mind our book. Frank had also taken an acute interest in native architecture, especially in the details of interior decoration. I suggested that he might make another book of his findings in that field, and finally that he should include in it the whole history of the House, as it had evolved in New Mexico. Every phase of house building had been represented there, from the grass lined pits of the Basket Makers to the many-storied Pueblo, and has never been completely erased. I was so much interested in this business that I wrote an introduction to the projected History of the House, to serve as a marker along that trail. With all this going on, nothing got ahead very rapidly, especially as the work at El Rito took up a great deal of time. But I continued to press forward with the book on Spanish Arts, and had made arrangements for having it suitably published.

Always I have been gifted—or plagued—by a kind of fore-knowing which makes me vaguely aware of the future progress of events, and along in the Fall of 1930 I began to be distressed with the presentiment that something was to intervene in the work of that book. So I insisted on Frank's committing to paper all that he had learned about the technique of the Spanish arts. I did not imagine that anything would happen to Frank, who was apparently so hale and

strong; I thought it much more likely that it would happen to me. I wanted to be sure that he got his knowledge into proper shape before it happened; and I was so certain of disaster that when he drove me to the train for my usual trip East, I bantered him to kiss me good by, thinking it would be a comfort to him to recall it if anything did happen. It happened to Frank, in his sudden death in February.

Thus I was left with the completed notes of his part of the Book on Spanish Arts, and also with the incompleting manuscript of his Native Tales and the outlines of the Story of the House. I meant, of course, to finish the book on the arts as soon as I had finished my autobiography, which I was then at work upon, but unfortunately the financial depression so altered the publisher's plans that it has been impossible to do anything about it to date. But I could and did finish the Native Tales. We had worked together so long and so completely in each other's confidence, with such free interchanges of material that I did not find it at all difficult to do. In a way it was, for the brief interval I was occupied with it, a restoration of my friend to me; it reassured me that when I do take up the work in the Spanish Arts, I will not lack his co-operation at need. I shall also probably write at the least a sketch of what he meant to do with the Story of the House.

Nothing, however, restores his quick, intelligent help in the actual conduct of the work of the society. Nobody supplies his rare, his unprecedented gift for the essentials of folk art and for the handling of folk. Nobody has his inimitable faculty of comradeship. When one thinks of the varied personalities who make up the entity which is Santa Fe, no one, it appears, could be less easily spared than Frank Applegate. His death remains one of those inexplicable incidents that take on the aspect of the most regrettable of accidents, not meant, but inevitable.

Realizing that he would have wished his collection of santos and bultos to remain here in Santa Fe, the society

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selected forty-five of the best pieces and purchased them from the estate, to constitute the Frank Applegate Memorial Collection. They have recently been placed on exhibition in the rooms of the Historical Society. The money is still largely to collect, but it is believed that it will not be refused by the people who knew him and the service he gave to the state in preserving the examples of its early art. It is more than fitting that they should remain here, associated with his name and prolonging the memory of his warm and brilliant personality.