

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 7 | Issue 2

Article 11

1937

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Recommended Citation

Neff, John C.. "A Visit to Kiowa Ranch." *New Mexico Quarterly* 7, 2 (1937). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol7/iss2/11>

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A Visit to Kiowa Ranch

By JOHN C. NEFF

I AM NOT a native of New Mexico, nor do I live there. But from my home back here in Ohio I pass many hours thinking about the long weeks I've known in the Sangre de Cristos packing for four hundred miles, and the months I've spent on the flats south of Las Vegas in roundup time. There are many tales to be told, but today there stands in my mind the picture of my visit to Kiowa Ranch far above Taos where I went to visit Mrs. D. H. Lawrence.

During two previous winters, I had come to know John Middleton Murry, Lawrence's friend of the early years, now a brilliant man of letters. He would always have me tell what little I could about New Mexico and the country from which Lawrence got so much. He wanted to know about the Indians and their pueblos and the sun setting over the Jemez Range and the smell of wood coming through the air at night. But like every man who has not seen the land, he was only half impressed. He will never know what tied Lawrence there until he sees it for himself. Two years ago, when he learned that I was going to spend the summer near Santa Fe, he begged me to visit Mrs. Lawrence and bring her his best wishes.

That I did, though I wasn't sure that I had any right to go calling at a house I didn't even know. When I arrived in Taos from Santa Fe one morning I began to get cold feet. Almost, I wanted to chuck the whole business. But when I thought of the hundreds of miles I'd come for just this hour, I shoved aside all my inhibitions and walked boldly into a store to inquire the way to Kiowa Ranch. A young German woman overheard me and came to my assistance. "You go up, up, up all the way," she said, "and the road is terrible. But she'll be happy to see you, with your greeting from Murry."

This was a good start. I didn't concern myself about how terrible the road might be, but I was glad of the encouragement in the German woman's voice. Past the road to the Taos Pueblo I drove, and up and over the long winding road to Arroyo Hondo. The sky was a brilliant one, and the sun was very warm: Almost to Cristobal I went, and then turned off in the direction of the mountains, following the sign pointing to "Brett." The private road was bad. It was so miserable my car bounded from rock to rock, just missing the springy juniper branches. The twists and turns made the going hard, but in what seemed no time at all I found myself at the end of the drive.

There was the house. A long, low place with a gabled metal roof and fine colored shutters. A magnificent view of the westward-sweeping country spread before it, with the mountains rising strong behind it. Little wonder why Lawrence loved the place. Or why he loved to stand and watch the sun melt into the little gap where the road goes down toward Santa Fe. Or why he yearned to be back there during his last months in far away Europe. I had for many years been familiar with the beauties of New Mexico and had accordingly thought I understood Lawrence's love for the land. But not until I saw the view from Kiowa Ranch and the house itself did I fully realize what held him to the country and what in his last years made him say: "I think New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had."

But there was no one on the porch, and the house seemed empty. I found a little bell near the portico and was about to ring when some one called out, "Come in!"

A dark short Italian stood near the door of what I presumed was the kitchen. He bowed, asking what I wanted. When I told him, he spoke to some one I couldn't see, someone beyond the door. In Italian he said, "A young stranger wants to see you." A woman's voice in guttural Italian answered him. "Have him come in." And then the man swept his arm in the direction of the wall beyond the door. Step-

ping inside and turning to the right, I saw sprawled out on a bed a large, reddish, smiling woman. It was Frieda Lawrence, looking much older than I had expected to find her. She was wearing a long print dress and a colored apron. She greeted me hospitably, but when I mentioned that Middleton Murry had asked me to see her, she jumped from the bed and cried: "Ach! Murry! Yes? Murry! You know him?"

The ice was broken. Mrs. Lawrence was all smiles. Her lips stretched across her face, and she hurried about the room to bring a chair for me. All the while she carried on a conversation about Murry and his visits to America. How was he? Would you describe him? What does he think of America? Suddenly she went across the room. "Ach! Will you have some of my wine! It is very good." And without waiting for an answer, she poured me a long glass and made me sit by the table with the man who was glancing through a copy of an Italian newspaper. The table was covered with a red and white checkered cloth, and there was a large bowl of fresh dark cherries and another filled with cakes and cookies. I sat there with them eating and drinking and talking as though they had known me all their lives. It had been the most comfortable entry into a strange house I'd ever made. The Italian spoke with Mrs. Lawrence in his own language. He wanted to know what Murry I was talking about. When he was told it was Middleton Murry who had brought about my visit, he was satisfied and sank back into his chair with the paper.

But Mrs. Lawrence had been ill that winter and was easily tired. She went back to her bed and stretched out again, still talking about Murry. Presently she began on Lawrence, always using his last name. She told how he loved the Indians and their dances, how he used to go down to the pueblos and sit in the sun to watch them dance. How he used to stand on the porch of the house and watch the glowing sun sink deep behind the far mountains. And then she would exclaim in German and laugh. Sometimes her words

came sharp and quick, but there was always a twinkle in her eyes that made me laugh with her. She seemed the easiest person on earth to get on with.

In a little while the Italian got up and left the house. But she would not hear of my going, "after how far you've come!" We were not alone long, though, for soon her daughter and son-in-law who were visiting from England came in. Naturally, they were interested in hearing about Murry's lectures in this country and how they had been received. We talked about American colleges, contrasting them and comparing them with Cambridge and Oxford. They seemed to object to our system of education and our noticeable lack, as they put it, of worthwhile scholarships. The Americans were wonderful people, but oh so slow. The hundreds and hundreds of colleges, what did they mean? Too much sameness, too similar. Their graduates were so slow in grasping the real significance of a situation, they so easily misunderstood. They were thick like oil.

This brought Mrs. Lawrence into the conversation again. She put out a cigarette and began. "You must never read Lawrence while you are young. Too many young people read him, and they do not know what he is saying. It is so difficult, then, to explain to them what he is saying. You must have had experiences and bitter tastes of life before you can read him with intelligence." And she would smile and laugh in her jolly way. "He was such a great man."

The son-in-law interrupted to ask if I'd read *Sons and Lovers*. He thought, along with the rest of England, that it was his best book. But Mrs. Lawrence broke in, saying, "No, no, you must read *The Plumed Serpent*. All of Lawrence is in that book. Two years he spent writing it, one winter in Chapala and the next winter in Oaxaca." I admitted that though I liked the earlier book immensely, I thought *The Plumed Serpent* more significant. Sometimes while we were talking, I had chance to look about the room. It was like an old kitchen I had once seen in Munich. There were gaily colored plates on racks along the walls. Huge pots and pans

hung in the corner near the stove, and lively curtains were at the small windows. The daughter came round and filled our glasses with more deep red wine and passed the brown crock of cookies. These people were hospitable to their finger tips. But I could not wear out my welcome. Through the open door that looked down toward Taos, I could see great dark clouds hanging low over the mountains. A storm would be coming up at the end of the afternoon. I thought of the miserable road back to the highway. It was time to leave.

As Mrs. Lawrence walked with me to the gate, the wind caught stray ends of her fine long hair and whipped it across her face. Her apron sailed out in front of her and her eyes grew bright in the cooling air. When I turned to bid her good-bye, her real character seemed to come to me. She was standing on a little knoll near the gate and her head was dipped toward the lowering sun. The sun glowing on her made her a radiantly handsome middle-aged woman. But it struck me that she was at once very much like a small happy child and a woman of wide wisdom. Her eyes were twinkling and her mouth laughing, swallowing and laughing in turns. She raised her arm high above her head and waved her hand vigorously. "Good-bye, hmmm, good-bye. It was good of you to come. Good-bye!"