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John Curtis Underwood

SANTA FE'S "MILLIONAIRE POET"

Doris Meyer

When the *Santa Fe New Mexican* referred to John Curtis Underwood in 1926 as “the millionaire poet,” he had been living in Santa Fe for more than eight years.¹ Underwood was by then a published author of five volumes of poetry, one of literary criticism, and various short stories. His work was widely reviewed and anthologized, and he had a national reputation as a writer who captured the reality of contemporary American life across the spectrum of society.² In reaction against the romantic traditions found in nineteenth-century poetry, Underwood’s work exposed the harsh underside of industrial growth as well as the common pursuits of ordinary people. His accomplishments not only as a writer but also as an art patron and sportsman made news in Santa Fe then, but today John Curtis Underwood’s name is rarely mentioned with the circles of artists and poets he frequented.³

This article offers an overview of Underwood’s life and work and makes a case for according him recognition as an important New Mexico writer in the decades after the First World War, when the Santa Fe arts colony was thriving. Frequent travels precluded his having a sustained vocal presence

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in Santa Fe in the way that writers like Mary Austin, Witter Bynner, or Alice Corbin Henderson did, but his poetry from this period reflects how closely he observed and how deeply he felt about his adopted home and its people. Following his move to New Mexico, Underwood's poetry expressed more lightness and lyricism. During more than thirty years of residence in Santa Fe, Underwood created significant examples of modern verse, not metaphysical and elliptical like some modernists, but rather focused intensely on contemporary experience in an accessible, almost conversational language. In addition to his poetry, Underwood's personal connections with major artists in Santa Fe shed light on the complex fabric of the arts community in its early years.

Born in 1874 in Rockford, Illinois, John Curtis Underwood was the only son of a prominent family. He was named for his grandfather, a well-known abolitionist sympathizer and district judge in Virginia, who had died the previous year.⁴ Underwood's parents owned valuable real estate in downtown Rockford and eventually left their son a trust fund. He was a graduate of Trinity College in Connecticut, class of 1896, and spent a good deal of time in New York City as a young man, reading voraciously, writing poetry, and sharing his ideas with friends in long letters and conversations.⁵ Although he could have been numbered among the idle rich, Underwood was a relentless critic of urban industrialization and the oppressive conditions it imposed on the working class.

Of his first book of poems, *The Iron Muse* (1910), a *New York Times* critic wrote, "Mr. Underwood plunges straight into the sea of modern life, to bring back his verses dripping with the salt vigor of its choppy waves. . . . [Readers] will find in him a man who tackles the things of today."⁶ Underwood wrote of skyscrapers and railroads, sweatshop children and derelicts, and the potential for great achievement in the early twentieth century, but also of the dehumanizing effects of consumerism and corporate greed. His poems reflected the concerns of the Progressive movement, which was at its height during this period, but Underwood did not preach political reform. He was essentially a social liberal who deplored the injustices of modern industrial society.

Perhaps as a counterpoint to Underwood's central focus on metropolitan life, several poems in *The Iron Muse* described scenes of the western United States. His custom of ending each verse with the date and place of writing shows that he was in New Mexico in 1904 and possibly earlier.⁷ In 1904, when he had just turned thirty, Underwood traveled south from New York to Florida, over to New Orleans, up through the Midwest, and out to the West Coast. He went mostly by train but often bicycled long stretches. In college he had been a sprinter, and all forms of outdoor sport were a passion for the rest of his life.⁸ Evidence of this is the fact that Underwood attended four

different Olympic Games: Athens (1896), London (1908), Stockholm (1912), and Amsterdam (1928). According to an article published in the *Santa Fe New Mexican* in 1928, “he possesses a surprising fund of information about athletes and their records in dozens of nations.”⁹ With the financial means to follow his fancy, he also traveled four times around the world, writing poems and letters to friends in his small, meticulous handwriting.

Underwood’s second book of poems, *Americans*, was published in 1912. In one hundred poems he portrayed individuals, from all walks of life, who spoke directly to the reader. In the foreword, Underwood says he writes “of the people, for the people and by the people,” and that he considers his poems “impressionistic experiments.”¹⁰ Calling himself an “insurgent,” he is unflinching in his criticism of the degrading aspects of modern life that “The Shopgirl” or “Slum Children” have to endure. Underwood’s facility with colloquial language and realistic detail is abundantly evident in this collection as it is in his next book of poetry, *Processionals* (1915).¹¹ Again, he focuses on the social injustices of American life in poems written in New York and during travels abroad in Paris, Algiers, Port Said, and Shanghai.

In 1914 Underwood turned a hand to literary criticism in *Literature and Insurgency*, a study of ten contemporary authors. His judgment of their work is guided by a profound distaste for pretension and the “postures of adulation,” both of which, he believed, had already corrupted the journalism of his day.¹² Mark Twain ranks high on his list of good writers, as does Edith Wharton, while Henry James, the expatriate, “with an inveterate tendency to ignore the real values of life in favor of the artificial and theatrical ones,” does not.¹³ Underwood disparages the tendency to import European literature at a time when American authors needed to find their own native expression, and he has harsh words for dilettante women readers whose lack of taste encouraged bad literature. Ultimately, Underwood saw his role as a dissident voice in a literary climate of excessive commercialism and mediocrity—a posture that likely did not sit well with many of his contemporaries:

[I]n general we remain as we have been since the American pioneer learned to dominate the forest, the prairie, the desert, the mountains and the rivers by machinery, and in turn suffered the machinery that he has evolved to dominate him; and we exist to-day a machine-made people, conventionalized, standardized, commercialized as to our food, clothes, houses, homes, offices, factories, theaters; amusements, social wants, pleasures and obligations. . . . [L]iterature like all other human phenomena is distinctly a product of environment in the material as well as the spiritual sense.¹⁴

This last comment may be the key to Underwood's fascination with portraying types of Americans from all walks of life—to his search for the “heart and soul of a great nation . . . something of lasting and significant value in prose or verse to give charm, color and power to the dreariness and debauchery of everyday, workaday existence.”¹⁵

Although he had visited Santa Fe in 1904, Underwood spent longer periods of time there in 1917 just as the United States became involved in World War I. In that same year his poems began to appear in *El Palacio*, the magazine of the Museum of New Mexico. The earliest of these poems, titled “Santa Fe,” begins, “She was a pilgrim city from the first,” and acknowledges the many wanderers who have sought solace there from ancient times to the present. Like them but in a modern context, Underwood writes,

We come on train and motor car today,
Where like a star all trails at last are one.
We walk her hills. To breathe there is to pray
Through that blue beauty born of snow and sun.¹⁶



ILL. 1. JOHN CURTIS UNDERWOOD (AT RIGHT) FILMING SANTA FE FIESTA INDIAN DANCE, 1920

(Photograph by H. C. Tibbitts, courtesy Palace of the Governors Photo Archives (NMHM/DCA), neg. no. 052622)

ILL. 2. JOHN CURTIS
 UNDERWOOD WITH MOVIE
 CAMERA, NEW MEXICO, 1920
 (Photograph by H. C.
 Tibbitts, courtesy Palace of
 the Governors Photo Archives
 (NMHM/DCA), neg. no.
 008040)



In May 1917 the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported that Underwood had spent several weeks in the upper Pecos, the mountains above Santa Fe, where he “dreamed and wrote” and put the finishing touches on his next publication.¹⁷ Titled *War Flames* (1917), this book of poetry in free verse portrays the devastating experiences of men, women, and children during the brutal war raging in Europe on many fronts.¹⁸ As Paul A. F. Walter, the editor of *El Palacio*, later wrote of *War Flames*,

[It] was inclusive of all the warring nations, even Germany, Austria and Russia, and gave a view so comprehensive that only a scholar, a voluminous reader and observer could and would have dared to present these vivid cosmopolitan sketches. It was written before the United States entered the war but was published by the MacMillan Company, in that epoch-making month of April 1917. If all other books and papers referring to the Great War were destroyed, this little volume of less than 200 pages would still give posterity a gripping and well-rounded story of the agony of nations. . . . Truly no other war has ever had an interpreter like John Curtis Underwood; no epoch a singer who expressed so loftily the heart-yearnings and soul-stirrings of humanity.¹⁹

A year later, in June 1918, *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse*, edited by Harriet Monroe in Chicago, published four new poems by Underwood under the heading “War Times.” One of the poems, “The Song of the Cheechas,” about the courageous Serbian defense against German attack, won the prestigious Helen Haire Levinson Prize awarded by *Poetry* for the best poem of 1918, a prize won in prior years by Carl Sandburg and Vachel Lindsay.²⁰ Considered a major honor for a contemporary American poet, the Levinson prize was subsequently awarded to Robert Frost (1922) and Amy Lowell (1924).

Not only was Underwood a nationally recognized poet but he was an amateur archaeologist. In July 1917, shortly after the founding of the Los Alamos

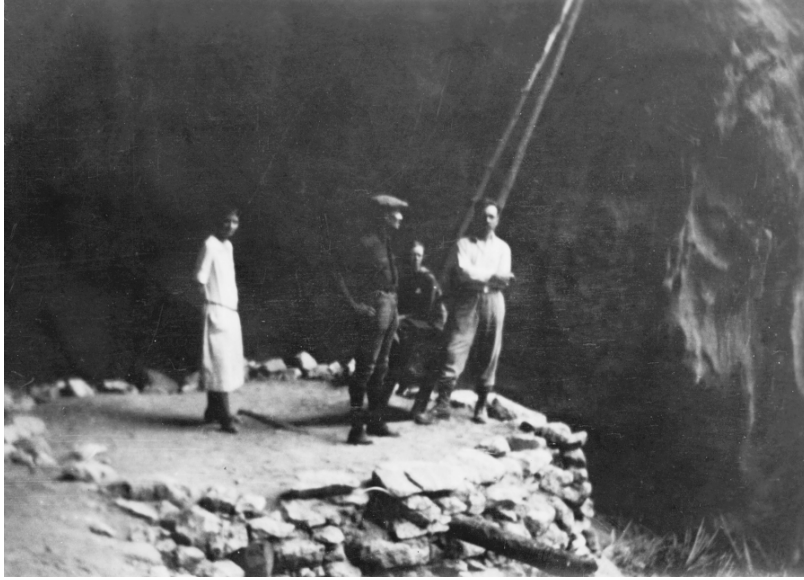
Ranch School for boys, the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported, “John Curtis Underwood, the poet, has commenced some important excavation work on the Los Alamos ranch, digging into the ruins in the rear of the ranch school headquarters building. One very interesting discovery has already been made by Mr. Underwood, it is said. He is fascinated with the surroundings at the Los Alamos ranch.”²¹ What that discovery was is not known. The following month Underwood toured Zuni and Hopi with visiting academics.²² His fascination with the ancient cultures of New Mexico is manifest in many poems, one of which, “Rito del Frijoles,” evokes the canyon home of preconquest Native Americans on the Pajarito Plateau, and begins:

The Spaniards called it Pajarito because they saw ther[e]
Greater colonies of swallows’ nests in taller mud banks,
Where caves star the cliffs and canyons run to the river.
But something stronger and stranger lingers here like an echo,
Like the sound of dry waters that run below these last year’s nests
of stone.

The winds first sang here, dancing on rock pools and dizzy ledges.
They ground grit in rock crevices in airy whirlpools.
The caves grew and remained till men found and fashioned them.
There was a sound of chipping of stone on stone, and of fragments
falling.
There was a sound of felling of trees with stone axes.
There was a hoisting of vigas home and a building of balconies.²³

Like many of his contemporaries in the Santa Fe arts colony, Underwood was inspired by the mythic endurance of indigenous cultures, but he also understood artist Marsden Hartley’s call for “aesthetic sincerity,” by which Hartley meant that New Mexico had to be portrayed on its own terms, with “authenticity of emotion” and a grounding in reality.²⁴ Both Hartley and Underwood hoped that the end of World War I would be an aesthetic turning point in the arts, toward American originality and away from European influences.

The visual arts were an important part of Underwood’s life. In 1919, while a fellow of the MacDowell Colony of writers and artists in Petersborough, New Hampshire, he met Raymond Jonson, the modernist painter, whom he invited to Santa Fe in 1922 and from whom he bought several works. Two years later, Jonson made Santa Fe his home. In *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913–1935*, Sharyn R. Udall writes, “Jonson recalled that Underwood

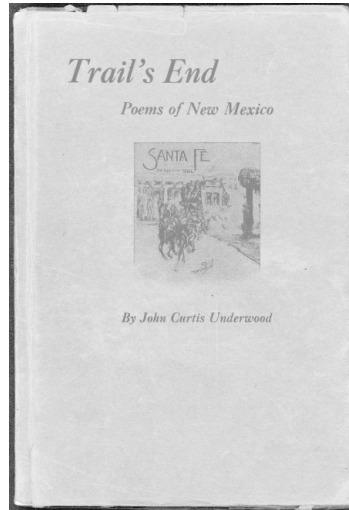


ILL. 3. ESTHER JOHNSON, JOHN CURTIS UNDERWOOD, VERA AND RAYMOND JONSON, 1926
 (Photograph courtesy Raymond Jonson Gallery Archive, University of New Mexico Art Museum)

greatly encouraged Santa Fe artists by buying their work when few others did.”²⁵ Indeed, in 1937 Jonson wrote to Underwood, “And so I look back over the years and can say I have no regrets. I am still happy to be here for this after all is home and the environment has always been conducive to work. And I here thank you for having introduced me to the great southwest. You have helped much toward making it possible, especially in the early days, to survive.”²⁶

Another of Underwood’s good friends was Sheldon Parsons, one of the earliest artists to come to Santa Fe and the first director of the new Museum of Art. The two of them visited friends in the Taos art colony and spent hours together in conversation at Parson’s home. Underwood dedicated a poem to his friend, “The Alcove of Beauty,” written in the museum and published in *El Palacio* in 1918.²⁷

Underwood’s enthusiasm for New Mexico was best expressed in a collection of fifty-seven poems in free verse, titled *Trail’s End: Poems of New Mexico*. Printed in Santa Fe in 1921, this small volume has fallen into oblivion in the years since its publication. It deserves a new appraisal for its vivid and engaging evocation of life in the old capital city in the heady days of burgeoning tourism and artistic creativity.²⁸ *Trail’s End* was Underwood’s tribute to a place that was, for him, a welcome respite from “those fevered cities” like Chicago and New York, but also a uniquely American blend



ILL. 4. TRAIL'S END: POEMS OF NEW MEXICO
(Photograph courtesy Fray Angélico Chávez History Library)

of cultures.²⁹ A reviewer of *Trail's End* in the *Chicago Tribune*, who evidently knew Underwood personally, wrote, "It is almost a rhymed guide book to Santa Fe, so Mr. Underwood says. He is, by the way, one of us just now, a picture of baked sunshine, all browns and yellows and tans from his hair to his shoe tips. He is so passionate a press agent for New Mexico that he makes one regret—almost—one's decision to seek other mountain heights."³⁰

An early poem in the book is dated 1 December 1915 and is a recollection of experiencing the Corn Dance at Santo Domingo Pueblo in late summer. Its last stanza evokes the timeless traditions of the festival:

All day they advance and retreat through the heat of the dance of
the harvest:
Til the last motor rolls away, the last cowboy rides away, and the
Mexican and Navajo riders,
Like a painted frieze that flamed above the horses' heads, and the
dancers' tablitas,
Are scattered like colors of sunset; and the Plaza lies shadowed
and dun:
And the last old Indian woman lets down her rusty sun umbrella,
And lets herself heavily down a long and dusty ladder,
To the feasting already begun, in glad homes of corn harvesting.³¹

Other poems describe places and people of Santa Fe, such as "The Old Palace," "The Tea Room," "The Trail Mender," "The Corner Drug Store," "The Hat Shop," and "The Blind Wood Chopper." In particular the poem "Flivvers" tells of the road-weary Model Ts that passed through Santa Fe:

They come and stand in the Plaza and drink deep there,
While their riders drink deep at our bubble fountains and soda
fountains;
Little tin tramps of the world with bulging side pockets and canteens,

And bedding rolled and shouldered on roofs as deep in dust,
 As the bleached straw suit cases strapped behind and never opened
 From Lowell, Moline and Mobile to Santa Monica and San Diego.

Their women wear clothes like their men as often as not,
 Sweaters, riding breeches, miners' boots and faded khaki overalls,
 Hiding all from head to foot but sun-browned faces and sun-tanned
 fingers,
 Girls that have soaked in the sun and have bathed in it in brown and
 hidden arroyos.
 Some of them sit in the Plaza with little hand mirrors and vanity
 cases and powder their faces.
 Some pencil letters and diaries, and some take time to stare
 At gray burros and brown adobes while their mothers are marketing,
 Big brown women and little wiry ones with bulging, faded, flowered
 knitting bags.

The flivvers stand fast or sulk to garages to be blacksmithed.
 Men with the trail's slow traces in browning faces,
 Of freedom from shop and farm and office desk and folio,
 Curb them, swing them away, feed them, groom them and bring
 them back
 Where the women and children are waiting. . . .³²

As an outdoorsman, Underwood reveled in the magnificent mountains and mesas around Santa Fe. Several of the poems in *Trail's End* describe hikes or trail rides on his horse, Grey Leg. Others are meditations inspired by the beauty of the moment, as in "Winter Midnight":

There are triptychs, panels, lunettes, in Holland, Paris, Italy;
 That one might rent for a million or more for a life time.
 But I could give them all if some painter would paint me perfectly
 All that I see these moonlit nights from my tent's east gable,
 In two tall triangles my leaning tent pole parts and marries.³³

Perhaps the most moving and personal poem in this collection is "The Revenant," meaning "the one who returns," written on 1 July 1919:

I sit in the New Museum Patio,
 At a long brown, bare writing table, in Santa Fé.

And the cool gray walls are good to me, and the gray shadows
 Of the vigas round the courtyard shift and lengthen,
 Like the dark green shadows on the green grass plot in the center.

The round, brown pine tree pillars of the cloister stand up sturdily.
 They have found peace at last in a place of long and ceaseless silences.
 That only the tireless ticking of a typewriter or the foot-fall of a
 careless tourist distracts or disturbs.

It is a place of peace and cool repose for people worn threadbare by
 the world's vast restlessness

With its open hatchway to Heaven and the sunlight that smiles on them.

I must go East again to the cities and seaports of all tall mountain
 voyaging,

Cities that are sirens painted and purblind, and homes of marred
 mothers and masters of men.

I shall go East to be lost for a time in the dazzle of the arc-lights and
 the coils of tortured subways.

As a diver toils through a sea wall of surf with strange stars in his
 eyes, and his heart and lungs tense with laboring,

I shall come out again in a wide world of air in the far-flung furrows
 of high snow-crested ranges,

There on the sinuous crest of the world, in the sun that is life to
 all living.

Here in this hatchway of time with the blue sky brooding white
 clouds above me

And the green earth growing white hollyhocks that bloom in the
 corners of our courtyard:

As a sailor sits cross-legged in a calm, dreaming a little as he stitches
 sails for tomorrow's adventuring;

I set my stitches of ink on white sails of paper for me or another;
 and I know

I shall come back again whatever may meet me tomorrow

To this West that I love best of all in the still, deep, hidden, human
 heart of me.

For when I die the winds of the sky shall bring back here what is
 left of me.³⁴

“The prolific Underwood,” as the *Santa Fe New Mexican* referred to him, published another book of poetry titled *Pioneers* in 1923.³⁵ Again he wrote of different types of people and, occasionally, things and places, but spoken in the first person. One poem, “Movies,” begins this way and is prophetic for its time:

If we are half as bad as you say we are,
If we are manufacturing hell wholesale in forty eight states as fast
and faster
Than the saloons and the brewers and distillers ever did or hoped to,
Because there is more money and more limelight in it; some day little
passionate people
Whose brains and whose pockets are pinched, will try to pass laws to
prohibit us.³⁶

A segment of twelve poems in *Pioneers* is dedicated to “Tribal Women,” by which Underwood suggests that women, whatever their calling, are united by a strength of spirit. In a poem entitled “Fallen,” he has a prostitute say the following:

Fallen? We all have risen from sea slime and ape cradles, slipped
back and staggered on through darker days than these.
And we women who pack your stock in trade for you are no more
fallen than your own suppressed desires and brooding dreams of
lions and centaurs.
I tell you that we who are proficient in this oldest profession in the
world are as necessary to you as many trained nurses.³⁷

In 1925 Underwood sponsored an invitational exhibit at the Santa Fe Museum of Art, offering a \$500 prize as well as a \$500 purchase prize to the winner. Although the museum had held group and individual shows since its opening, most local artists still found it hard to earn a living. Among those who took part in Underwood’s invitational were Bert G. Phillips, B. J. O. Nordfeldt, William Shuster, and Sheldon Parsons. The prize was won by Raymond Jonson for his work *The Power of God*, which became part of Underwood’s personal collection and was donated after his death to the Jonson Gallery at the University of New Mexico. Underwood also purchased Jonson’s painting *Light* as a gift for the Museum of Art where it remains today. The fact that Underwood determined the prize winners was the subject of some controversy in local art circles, but his devotion to the arts was never in doubt.

In the same year, Underwood also sponsored a poetry contest with monetary prizes. He received nearly a thousand submissions from writers all over the country; the first prize went to William Stahl and the second to Mary Austin, a powerful Santa Fe presence in her own right.³⁸

Details of Underwood's personal life in Santa Fe are scarce, for no personal archives or family memorabilia have been located to date.³⁹ We do know he purchased property in 1926 on El Caminito, off Camino del Monte Sol, in the artists' neighborhood of Santa Fe, where he intended to build a home.⁴⁰ In addition the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported in June 1927, "John Curtis Underwood, wealthy poet and critic, announced today that he had perfected plans to open what he terms a 'real art gallery' in Santa Fe. . . . The gallery, or art emporium, is to be located on Upper Palace Avenue near the post office building and Mr. Underwood's idea is to use it for the purpose of selling the pictures of seven or eight artists in whom he is interested. These, it is rumored, are the famous 'Cincos' and two or three others."⁴¹ In August 1927, *El Palacio* noted, "[T]he new gallery will pay special attention to exhibits of the Modernists among Santa Fe and Taos painters and will make special efforts to secure for them recognition of the art world."⁴² The Pioneer Art Gallery, whose name may have been inspired by Underwood's most recent book, was one of the first commercial galleries in Santa Fe. Despite the growing tourist trade and the recent success of two summer art schools, the art-purchasing audience in Santa Fe was still in its infancy.⁴³ The Pioneer Art Gallery survived only two years.⁴⁴

On 28 November 1928 at the age of fifty-four, Underwood married Emily Rudolph, twenty-eight, in the Methodist-Episcopal Church in Santa Fe. Of Latvian background, Emily Rudolph Underwood was born in New York City and grew up on a farm in Kingston, New York, where she developed a passion for horses. She attended Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles and later specialized in equine painting. The Underwoods' home on El Caminito was larger than most of their neighbors'. In October 1936 the *Santa Fe New Mexican* reported that Will Shuster had a studio on the Underwoods' property and entertained friends at a cocktail party there.⁴⁵ They also had a tennis court because Underwood was an avid tennis player.

In 1931 with the primary destination being the ruins of the Temple of Angkor Wat in Cambodia, Underwood left from New York in September after driving east with his wife. Emily did not go with him; she stayed in the suburbs of New York, visiting her family. In March 1932 she drove back to Santa Fe via Chicago, taking Raymond and Vera Jonson with her as they were financially strapped and in need of a ride back home after a stay in New York. On his return trip from Asia, Underwood had to eliminate a stop in Japan because of a severe

eye ailment. He sailed from Manila to San Francisco and went to San Diego for a month of medical treatments before returning to Santa Fe in April 1932.⁴⁶

Underwood's final book, *Interpreters*, was published in 1939. Many of the poems were written during his trip around the world in 1931 and are more autobiographical than his earlier work. One of these, "Listener," dated 1 September 1934 and written in Santa Fe, is a summation of his life through the influence of music:

I grew up in a Puritan town somewhere west of a new
Chicago,
A gray place in the lives of its people; our old oak grove
and garden gave color enough.
There was a long black piano in our formal parlor,
no more instruments of music; we heard it very rarely,
A lingering echo of a lost fairyland I have been finding
forty years.

There was music in church, I liked processional hymns
most.
I went to a military school, I heard many daily bugle
calls.
And music that stirs me most still is bagpipes skirling, or
massed drums rolling, marching,
Like running messengers of older warfare, stirring, sum-
moning red blood in a man to get ready
For larger living when the battle flags wave through the
running cheering crowd.

I went to college and heard more organ music,
Caged in a stone and oak chapel; I heard class songs,
drinking songs.
I went to New York; I wanted to write; I had an eye
mind more than an ear mind.
But because there was music in me somewhere, I practised
poetry,
Printed echoes of hidden places; I lived in a world of
printed books and breathless people many years.

I wanted to travel; I toured on a red bicycle; I went
round the world again and again.

I heard savage music, bare feet stamping to sullen drum-
ming, and went back to old books in steamer berths.
I looked and I listened to grand opera in Naples and Paris,
and much of it seemed parody
Of plays that had pleased me and stirred me in Manhattan,
when a dead Shakespeare still adventured
With people's souls; I learned about pictures, I liked to
live with painters; I heard gypsy music
In Paris cafés where I learned about living till the World
War called me home.

Later I went west again; I rediscovered New Mexico,
Where the mountains too make music, time's old gray
instrument
Played on by fitting lights and clinging shadows; some
of the men who made me
Must have lived in this land and loved it; I bought land
and I built me a house
To be a new fulcrum for living; two years later I married
her.

I found a new focus for feeling and thinking; there is
music in her voice.
Some of it lingers on her lips when she looks from her
piano and smiles at me.
She is a magician, calling up her dead masters from her
dark cabinet and big sounding box.
But the Great Spirit of all music has made of her mind
and body a better one;
Drumming me on by shining trails too long blind, to a
lost fairyland and faith I try to find.⁴⁷

As wealthy patrons of culture and society in Santa Fe, the Underwoods received the attention of *New Mexico Magazine*, one of the leading magazines on Southwest culture and tourism. An article in 1943 titled "Cow Country Arabians" was not about Underwood himself but about his wife and her love of horses. In 1936 the Underwoods purchased a large ranch near the Tiffany turquoise mines south of Santa Fe where Emily Underwood bred and trained Arabian horses. According to the article, "She has the finest collection of Arabians in New Mexico. Her breeding of them already is world famous. . . . Those

who know about the unusual and detailed care needed for these high-strung horses, say Mrs. Underwood is ‘one in a million’ in the completeness of her qualifications as a trainer and her success in teaching these horses.”⁴⁸

Their ranch home had “an impressive living room where a full-size concert grand piano is modestly part of the whole, and a towering medieval-scaled fireplace of pueblo design” dominated the room surrounded by book shelves.⁴⁹ One can imagine the aging Underwood indulging and understanding his younger wife’s dedication to horses. The article notes that he wrote the following verses in a book about horses he presented her:

Here are horses—still more
To add to your holdings of more than a score;
Arabs like several in your stable, persons
Of proud pedigrees.
May you never while you live be without a
Sufficiency of friends, such as these;
And, in the midst of your equine surroundings,
Remember me, now and then, please.⁵⁰

In 1948 the Underwoods sold the ranch south of Santa Fe and purchased another ranch in Santa Cruz, close to Española. Not long thereafter, on 14 January 1949, following a short illness, Underwood died of a heart attack at the age of seventy-four. As the Underwoods had no children, his entire estate was left to his wife.⁵¹ He was buried in Rockford, Illinois, where his family history went back more than a hundred years.

The Underwood story has an interesting coda, which involves the well-known Santa Fe artist Gustave Baumann (1881–1971). Born in Germany, Baumann moved with his family to Chicago when he was young, and later studied at the Chicago Art Institute and at the Arts and Crafts School in Munich. When he first came to Santa Fe in 1918, around the same time that Underwood settled there, his work was drawing national attention. A master of the color woodcut, Baumann crafted images of the Southwest that are among the most iconic works of the Santa Fe arts colony. Known as “a thoughtful man with a sense of fun,” Baumann lived in Santa Fe for the rest of his life and became one of the legendary artists of the Southwest.⁵²

One particular woodcut by Baumann showing a portrait of a gentleman with the carved text “El primero poeta laureado de la Nueva Mexico” (the first prize-winning poet of New Mexico) has been the subject of much speculation regarding the identity of the subject and the date of its carving.⁵³ According to Gala Chamberlain, director of the Annex Galleries in Santa Rosa, California,

who is writing the catalogue raisonné of Baumann's oeuvre, this woodblock has a surround with images of Frijoles Canyon pictographs, which Baumann associated with the individual in the portrait. Chamberlain notes that he also made a second block of the same image, which does not have the carved text in Spanish or the surround but has this inscription in Baumann's handwriting underneath it: "The Mysterious Stranger of the Black Mesa."

The image in the two woodcuts resembles Underwood, who wore glasses and sported a mustache. Chamberlain has found evidence of a friendship between the two artists in a scrapbook kept by Baumann, although details are not known. Underwood's stature in the Santa Fe community as an art



ILL. 5. WOODCUT BY GUSTAVE BAUMANN OF
"EL PRIMERO POETA LAUREADO DE LA NUEVA
MEXICO"

(Photograph courtesy the Annex Galleries for Ann Baumann)



ILL. 6. WOOD BLOCK BY GUSTAVE
BAUMANN WITH SURROUND OF
IMAGES OF FRIJOLES CANYON
*(Photograph courtesy the Annex
Galleries for Ann Baumann)*



ILL. 7. WOODCUT OF ANOTHER VERSION OF “EL PRIMERO POETA” Baumann included an inscription below, “The Mysterious Stranger of the Black Mesa.”

(*Photograph courtesy the Annex Galleries for Ann Baumann*)

patron and as a nationally recognized poet may have inspired Baumann to create this tribute to him.⁵⁴ In addition they were both amateur archaeologists who explored Frijoles Canyon.⁵⁵ This could explain Baumann’s inscription, “The Mysterious Stranger of the Black Mesa,” as an allusion to Underwood’s

meditative character and the fact that he did his excavations on his own.

Gala Chamberlain agrees that there is compelling evidence for identifying the figure in the woodcuts as Underwood, and she estimates their production in 1949, the year of Underwood’s death, noting that Baumann was known to honor friends after their death with different kinds of creative “ceremonies.”⁵⁶

Santa Fe’s “millionaire poet” was clearly an acknowledged presence in his own time but his name has faded into the background, and no study has previously been published about him or his work. Whether this is because he kept a lower profile in the arts community, given that he was “reserved in character” as his obituary notes, or because his wealth and world travels set him apart from his peers, is hard to ascertain.⁵⁷ Further information may yet come to light to fill in more details of his biography. In the meantime, John Curtis Underwood earned his place as an influential and significant figure in the Santa Fe arts colony and as one of early twentieth-century New Mexico’s most accomplished authors.

Notes

1. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 5 March 1926.
2. John Curtis Underwood’s poetry appeared in the following anthologies between 1915 and 1920: Hamilton Fish Armstrong, ed., *The Book of New York Verse* (New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1917); Howard Willard Cook, ed., *Our Poetry of Today*, Modern American Writers (New York: Moffat, Yard, and Co., 1918); Walton Hale Hamilton, ed., *Current Economic Problems: A Series of Readings in the Control of Industrial Development* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1915); Lloyd R. Morris,

- ed., *The Young Idea: An Anthology of Opinion Concerning the Spirit and Aims of Contemporary American Literature* (New York: Duffield and Company, 1917); Upton Sinclair, ed., *The Cry for Justice: An Anthology of the Literature of Social Protest; The Writings of Philosophers, Poets, Novelists, Social Reformers, and Others Who Have Voiced the Struggle against Social Injustice, Selected from Five Languages, Covering a Period of Five Thousand Years*, with an introduction by Jack London (Philadelphia, Pa.: John C. Winston Company, 1915); and Louis Untermeyer, ed., *Modern American Poetry: An Introduction* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Howe, 1919).
3. Underwood is merely listed as a Santa Fe writer in Marta Weigle and Kyle Fiore, *Santa Fe and Taos: The Writer's Era, 1916–1941* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Ancient City Press, 1982). Lynn Cline, *Literary Pilgrims: The Santa Fe and Taos Writers' Colonies, 1917–1950* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2007) does not mention him at all. A study of Southwest literature, originally published in 1938, revised and enlarged in two subsequent editions, also omits Underwood: Mabel Major and T. M. Pearce, *Southwest Heritage: A Literary History with Bibliographies*, 3d ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972).
 4. See Patricia P. Hickin, "John C. Underwood and the Antislavery Movement in Virginia, 1847–1860," *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 73 (April 1965): 156–68. In 1863 Pres. Abraham Lincoln appointed Underwood to the federal circuit for the Eastern District of Virginia. Underwood served as a federal judge for the Eastern District until his death in 1873.
 5. *The John Curtis Underwood '96 Memorial Prize in Poetry*, established by Clarence I. Penn, Class of 1912, is awarded annually by Trinity College to an outstanding student in the arts.
 Between 1902 and 1905, Underwood maintained a lengthy correspondence with Harriet Burton (1873–1949), a highly educated young woman from New York who would become a noted suffragist and social reformer. He regularly sent her his poems under the repeated title, "Love Letters of an Evolutionist." There are seventeen such poems among his extant letters. Although Underwood seems to have carried a torch for Burton, she did not encourage his devotion. These letters describe his travels and show his literary preferences, his critical viewpoints about city life, and his efforts to influence Burton's intellectual development. See Harriet Wright Burton, Laidlaw Papers, Schlesinger Library, Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, Harvard University.
 6. *New York Times*, 30 July 1910; and John Curtis Underwood, *The Iron Muse* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1910).
 7. The final poem in Underwood's book *Trail's End: Poems of New Mexico* (Santa Fe: New Mexico Publishing Corporation, 1921), titled "Envoy," is dated 5 May 1904 and begins: "I have come back again to this mountain land I always love/ After many journeyings, farther east and west," which indicates that he was in New Mexico even before 1904. This is confirmed by a letter to Harriet Burton from St. Augustine, Florida, on 15 January 1904, in which Underwood expresses his admiration for St. Augustine but says that Santa Fe is a more interesting place. The year he first came to New Mexico is not known.
 8. In August 1922, at the age of forty-eight, Underwood set a record hiking time by climbing forty miles to Lake Peak and back in thirteen hours. "25 Years Ago," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 18 August 1947. Lake Peak, at over twelve thousand feet, is a rugged mountain in the Pecos Wilderness about twenty miles northeast of Santa Fe.

9. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 8 September 1928.
10. John Curtis Underwood, *Americans* (New York, 1912).
11. John Curtis Underwood, *Processionals* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1915).
12. John Curtis Underwood, "Democracy and Mark Twain," in *Literature and Insurgency: Ten Studies in Racial Evolution; Mark Twain, Henry James, William Dean Howells, Frank Norris, David Graham Phillips, Stewart Edward White, Winston Churchill, Edith Wharton, Gertrude Atherton, and Robert W. Chambers* (New York: Mitchell Kennerley, 1914), 15.
13. Underwood, "Henry James, the Expatriate," in *Literature and Insurgency*, 51.
14. Underwood, preface to *Literature and Insurgency*, vi–vii, xi.
15. *Ibid.*, v.
16. John Curtis Underwood, "Santa Fe," *El Palacio* 4 (1917): 2. Poem dated 25 February 1917.
17. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 13 June 1917.
18. John Curtis Underwood, *War Flames* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1917).
19. Paul A. F. Walter, "New Mexico in the Great War," *New Mexico Historical Review* 1 (October 1926): 402, 405.
20. John Curtis Underwood, "The Song of the Cheechas," *Poetry: A Magazine of Verse* 12 (June 1918): 117–18. The poem was read aloud in Santa Fe before its publication by Alice Corbin Henderson, assistant editor of *Poetry*, at a public gathering at the new Museum of Art in Santa Fe. Underwood donated the \$200 prize to the United War Work Drive in Santa Fe.
 On 12 September 1918 Underwood registered in Santa Fe for the draft; he was forty-four at the time and listed his permanent home address as the De Vargas Hotel in Santa Fe. Santa Fe County Draft Registration Card, serial number 123, order number A1217.
21. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 24 July 1917.
22. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 15 August 1917.
23. John Curtis Underwood, "Rito del Frijoles," *Trail's End*, 51–52. Poem dated 2 November 1918. Another example of Underwood's interest in archaeology is "Treasure Seekers," *Trail's End*, 72. Poem dated 3 April 1921.
24. Marsden Hartley, "Aesthetic Sincerity," *El Palacio* 5 (9 December 1918): 332–33.
25. Sharyn R. Udall, *Modernist Painting in New Mexico, 1913–1935* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1984), 105.
26. Jonson to Underwood, 22 June 1937, Raymond Jonson Gallery Archive, University of New Mexico Art Museum, Albuquerque, New Mexico. My thanks to Robert "Chip" Ware, curator, for making the Jonson letters and photographs available to me.
27. John Curtis Underwood, "The Alcove of Beauty," *El Palacio* 5 (9 December 1918): 330–31.
28. Underwood's *Trail's End* appeared one year after Alice Corbin's *Red Earth: Poems of New Mexico*, ed. Lois Palken Rudnick and Ellen Zieselman (1920; repr., Santa Fe: Museum of New Mexico Press, 2003). Both Corbin (who used her maiden name when she published poetry) and Underwood try to capture the vital essence of New Mexico, but Corbin's verse is more imagist, pared of detail, and inspired by Indian and Hispanic rituals in addition to natural surroundings. Her verse has a metaphysical, timeless quality, whereas Underwood's is more rooted in the present, in the people and places that caught his attention, capturing the modern as well as the timeless spirit of

- New Mexico. Corbin Henderson included a poem by Underwood in her collection, *The Turquoise Trail: An Anthology of New Mexico Poetry* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1928).
29. Underwood, "Envoy," *Trail's End*, 79.
 30. *Chicago Tribune*, 24 July 1921.
 31. Underwood, "Corn Dance, Santo Domingo," *Trail's End*, 54.
 32. Underwood, "Flivvers," *Trail's End*, 10. Poem dated 22 February 1919.
 33. Underwood, "Winter Midnight," *Trail's End*, 46. Poem dated 22 November 1918. According to the *Santa Fe New Mexican*, in August 1922 Underwood set a record time hiking forty miles round trip to Lake Peak in the Pecos Wilderness. "25 Years Ago," *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 18 August 1947.
 34. Underwood, "The Revenant," *Trail's End*, 70–71.
 35. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 22 August 1923.
 36. John Curtis Underwood, *Pioneers* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Santa Fe New Mexican Publishing Corporation, 1923), 46.
 37. Underwood, *Pioneers*, 74.
 38. "John Curtis Underwood Prize Awards" and "Award of Underwood Poetry Prize," *El Palacio* 19 (1 October 1925): 146–47, 149–50.
 39. The author would be grateful to receive any information regarding collections of Underwood's personal papers: dmey22@aol.com.
 40. Warranty Deed, no. 247, dated 23 July 1926, Santa Fe County Clerk's Office, Santa Fe, New Mexico. Underwood purchased additional land next to this site in 1928, see Warranty Deed, no. 216, and Warranty Deed, no. 217, dated 15 October 1928, Santa Fe County Clerk's Office, Santa Fe, New Mexico.
 41. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 20 June 1927. The Cinco Pintores were a group of five young artists who joined together in 1921 to exhibit their works. They were Will Shuster, Jozef Bakos, Willard Nash, Walter Mruk, and Fremont Ellis, all of whom built their homes and even partied together in the Monte Sol neighborhood. They disbanded in 1926.
 42. *El Palacio* 23 (13 August 1927): 168. Underwood's familiarity with the artists and writers in Santa Fe is evident in a descriptive letter he wrote to an editor of "The Gossip Shop," a section of the magazine *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life*, in 1922, at the end of which he said, "The future of this oldest capital as a centre of light and learning to a machine-stenciled and war-racked continent seems assured." John Curtis Underwood, "The Gossip Shop," *The Bookman: A Review of Books and Life*, September 1921–February 1922, 410–11.
 43. For an excellent description of the challenges of making a living as an artist in Santa Fe in the 1920s, see *Santa Fe Art Colony*, essay by Sharyn R. Udall, with an introduction by Julie S. Schimmel (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Gerald Peters Gallery, 2006), 22.
 44. The Pioneer Art Gallery and Tea Room, 121 E. Palace Avenue, is listed in the New Mexico Business Directory only from 1928 to 1929. As late as 1947, there were only two art galleries operating in Santa Fe; in 1964 there were twelve. See Michael Ettema, "Canyon Road and the Santa Fe Art Colony," *Canyon Road Arts: Visitors Guide to Arts, Dining and Santa Fe Lifestyle* (Santa Fe, N.Mex.: Medicine Man Gallery, 2005), 54–58.
 45. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 24 October 1936.
 46. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 9 April 1932.

47. John Curtis Underwood, "Listener," *Interpreters: Poems* (New York: G. P. Putnam, 1939), 148–50.
48. Helen Fetter Cook, "Cow Country Arabians," *New Mexico Magazine*, 30 April 1943, 14, 30.
49. *Ibid.*, 15.
50. John Curtis Underwood quoted in Cook, "Cow Country Arabians," 15.
51. John Curtis Underwood, will dated 26 October 1947, Court Clerk's Office, Rio Arriba County District Court, Tierra Amarilla, New Mexico.
52. Calla Hay, "Gustave Baumann," *El Palacio* 78 (1971): 35.
53. The correct Spanish of this phrase would be "El Primer Poeta Laureado de Nuevo México." Why Baumann used Spanish rather than English here is not known. It might have been a way to recognize New Mexico's bilingual culture along with its Native American heritage in the images on the surround, or it may have been a playful twist that would have been appreciated in a Hispanic-oriented community. Ann Baumann recalls that her father knew enough Spanish to get by but could neither read nor write it. "Poeta laureado" can also be translated as "poet laureate" but it carries an official connotation that would be incorrect in this context.
54. To my knowledge no Spanish-language poet in New Mexico prior to Underwood was the recipient of any significant prize. See Doris Meyer, *Speaking for Themselves: Neomexicano Cultural Identity and the Spanish-Language Press, 1880–1920*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996).
55. See Gustave Baumann, "Concerning a Small Untroubled World," *El Palacio* 78 (1972): 15–33. In this article he reminisces about his early experiences in Santa Fe, including his forays into amateur archaeology on the Pajarito Plateau which had become the Bandelier National Monument in 1916: "If you visualize artists and archaeologists in two distinct camps, there still were times when the artists forgot their business and went completely archaeological . . . We all had a pet ruin somewhere in which to conduct secret diggings unbeknown to Dr. Hewett [of the School of American Archaeology in Santa Fe] who, while he liked artists, did not want them messing around in his business."
56. I am indebted to Gala Chamberlain for corresponding with me regarding the above, answering many questions along with Ann Baumann, and for accepting my suggestion that John Curtis Underwood was the probable subject of Baumann's woodcuts. I also wish to thank Thomas Leech, curator of the Palace Press and Print Shop of the Palace of the Governors/New Mexico History Museum in Santa Fe, who first brought the woodcut image to my attention. A recreation of Gustave Baumann's print studio with many of his original art materials and equipment can be seen in the Palace Print Shop.
57. *Santa Fe New Mexican*, 15 January 1949.

