

birth of a museum

A controversial plan devised

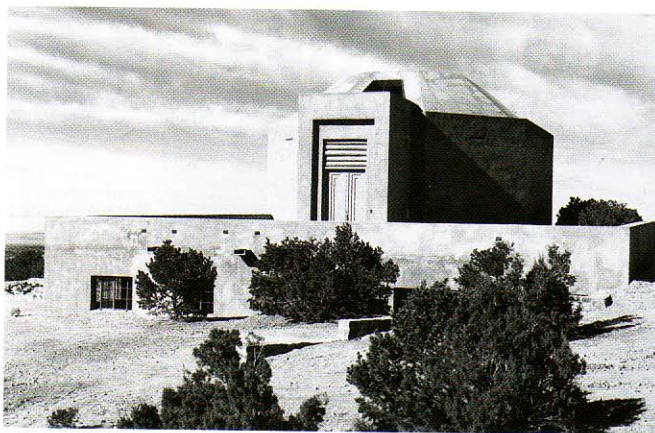
by a New Englander and a Navajo
resulted in the preservation of history

BY RICHARD McCORD

Mary Cabot Wheelwright, founder of the stunning Santa Fe museum that bears her name, lost most of her fortune in the Great Depression. She did not attend college, and her later efforts at research were disparaged as unscientific and emotional. She was not a New Mexican or even a Westerner. She ignited bitter opposition among Navajos and in the Santa Fe museum establishment. In short, Mary Cabot Wheelwright was not the most likely candidate to found a major museum of Native American art. But she was also determined, headstrong, outspoken, stubborn—and a visionary. She stuck to her guns, and today the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian is unique in the world, recognized for preserving the existence of the most sacred religious traditions of the Navajo world.

Born in 1878, Wheelwright grew up as the only child in a Boston Brahmin family. Her health was delicate, and because education for women was not considered important in those Victorian times, she was taught at home. She made “grand tours” to Europe, sailed, and played the piano. But no suitor claimed her, and, after her parents’ deaths in 1917, when she was 39, she decided that it was time for a change.

Wheelwright made her first trip to New Mexico in 1918. It included a visit to the Navajo Reservation, the nation’s largest. Three years later, at a trading post south of Window Rock, she met the tribe’s most revered singer (what outsiders would call a medicine man), Hosteen Klah. Then in his mid-fifties, Klah was concerned that the sacred knowledge he had mastered during his lifetime might vanish with his death. Already, the traditions were fading fast. Between 1863 and 1868, the U.S. government had relocated the Navajo from their homeland in the red-rock country of what is now the Four Corners area to the Bosque Redondo in central New Mexico. There, conditions for the Diné, as the



Above: Mary Cabot Wheelwright with one of her Lhasa apsos, circa 1954, photo by Laura Gilpin. Left: Original museum building, courtesy Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.

Navajo people call themselves, were harsh and strange. Survival became paramount. Religious customs moldered, and elder singers died without having trained protégés to replace them.

Klah was an exception. Born at the Bosque, he showed from early youth a remarkable memory. Growing up on the reservation after the Diné were allowed to return to their homeland, he was chosen to relearn the old,

Continued on page 58

THE WAY WE REALLY WERE

Continued from page 19

unwritten songs. He showed an astonishing aptitude, but the task was overwhelming. Many of the songs lasted hours or even days. The longest, the Yeibichai, or Nightway, lasted nine nights; it took Klah 26 years to learn it fully. At that time, the U.S. government was boarding young Navajos in schools where, in an effort to “assimilate” them, they were forbidden to speak their own language, a situation that further imperiled the preservation of the old ways.

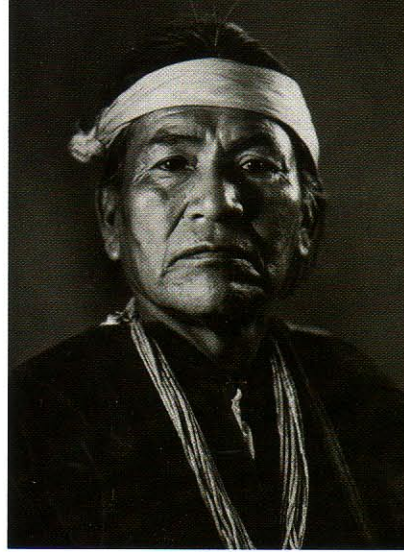
When Klah and Wheelwright met at a trading post in 1921, the rapport was immediate. She was seeking a new life, and he was eager to embrace new technology such as telephones, automobiles, and Edison recording devices. He invited her to a sacred ceremony, and from then on she was determined to do whatever she could to preserve such rites.

Klah was equally committed. Although he had devoted himself to the old traditions, he saw innovation as the only hope

WHEN KLAH AND WHEELWRIGHT MET AT A TRADING POST IN 1921, THE RAPPORT WAS IMMEDIATE.

for the future. Controversy erupted on the reservation when he asked Navajo women to begin depicting holy icons in their weavings. Before then, such images had always been created by men, and were displayed only in temporary sand paintings, or dry paintings, which were destroyed after ceremonies. Because of his stature, Klah prevailed. When Wheelwright came along, however, a new furor arose.

Time and again, this Eastern Anglo woman returned west with wax cylinders that she used to record Klah's songs, a few minutes at a time. She kept at it until she had collected 1,700 cylinders of sounds that had never before been recorded. She also wrote down English translations of secret myths, and arranged for Anglo artists to paint large reproductions of sacred dry paintings, with Klah checking the images for authenticity.



Hosteen Klah (1867-1937), courtesy Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian.

Many traditional Diné were outraged by these unprecedented activities. They insisted that Klah stop, and demanded an evil-purging rite to exorcise the sacrilege they felt he had perpetrated. Klah refused. He believed that, unless some record of Navajo rites was set down permanently, the religion might disappear. He and Wheelwright continued the work, and their collection of Navajo lore became the largest ever gathered anywhere in the world.

By 1927, Wheelwright had decided that these precious records should be stored in one place. So she offered to build, for the newly forming Laboratory of Anthropology in Santa Fe, a separate “Navajo House of Prayer.” The Laboratory board eagerly accepted—until Wheelwright insisted that the structure be designed in the “spirit of a hooghan [hogan].”

The dominant architectural style in Santa Fe at the time was the low, flat Pueblo Revival style. The tall, unusual octagonal design submitted in 1930 by Wheelwright's architect, Santa Fe artist William Penhallow Henderson, bore no resemblance to that style. It was rejected by the Laboratory of Anthropology.

Wanting to see the museum built before Klah died, Wheelwright asked Henderson to alter the design, while keeping the hoogan theme. But time and again over a bitter three-year period, all his plans were turned down. Wheelwright railed against the Laboratory of Anthropology “lack of taste,” while board members criticized her project as “emotional rather than scientific.” The board was also disgruntled by Wheelwright's refusal to set up an endowment for the museum, even though

they knew that the Depression had ravaged her financial resources.

Finally, after Wheelwright's impassioned 1932 plea—which claimed that the hogan design was “as important as the pyramids in Egypt,” and added, “it surely is as important to study the thought of a people as to study their potsherds and bones!”—failed to sway the board, she temporarily gave up on the project. Almost immediately, however, her friend Amelia Elizabeth White donated eight acres to enable the museum to be built on land next to the Laboratory of Anthropology.

To make her dream come true, Wheelwright sold several houses she owned back east. When Klah fell ill, she rushed the museum building into construction in 1936, in time for him to bless the ground. Although he died before the slightly renamed “House of Navajo Religion” opened in 1937, he had the satisfaction of knowing that his mission had been accomplished.

In 1939, the facility's name was changed to the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art. Until 1957 Wheelwright held the title of museum director, and for long periods she lived in a basement apartment under the museum.

Wheelwright died in Maine in 1958. In 1976, much of the original collection was returned to the Navajo Nation, in the first voluntary act of repatriation by an American museum, and in 1977 the museum was given its current name. Today, all Indian tribes and nations are honored there.

Perhaps Wheelwright's greatest satisfaction during the 20 years she headed the museum was that many of the people who made use of the resources there—the wax cylinders, dry painting images, myth translations, and other sacred lore—turned out to be young Navajo men striving to keep their religion alive. Without Mary Cabot Wheelwright and Hosteen Klah, it might well have died. **SF**

Each time he returns to the Wheelwright Museum, Santa Fe writer (and founder of the Santa Fe Reporter) Richard McCord is struck anew by its architectural grace.