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A House Became a Home

James Calvin Schaap

For 100 years of life in Zuni pueblo, there’s been only one “big house.”

To say it loomed over the pueblo risks understatement. Even in its declining years nothing in town or out could rival its massive triangular bulk. It was not just one-of-a-kind, it was defiantly so, as if some Kansas tornado picked it up from its Midwest moorings and simply dropped it off right there at the heart of things in Zuni, right there in the middle of town.

After all those years, it’s coming down.

Andrew Vander Wagon and Herman Fryling, the Christian Reformed (CRC) missionaries who came to McKinley County and the Navajo reservation in 1896, started working at Ft. Defiance and stayed there until they determined the rivalry between the white Protestants and white Catholics was too much a tumult. They looked for a hacienda of their own and settled on a place then called the Smith Ranch, six miles east of Gallup, because, most importantly, there was water—two wells and a pumping engine, even a windmill. In time, Smith Ranch became Rehoboth Mission.

The strategy of the old-time missionaries was no particular secret: they aimed to bring “the Word of the Lord” to the reservation and thereby create brand new Christians out of what they considered to be “the heathen” spread widely over the Navajo reservation.

But the story goes that Andrew Vander Wagon, who never became a real Reverend, quickly ran low on energy, so to speak, because Navajo people, by preference and tradition, lived so widely apart from each other. A man couldn’t be efficient at preaching the word when you had to spend so much time in the saddle.

Vander Wagon stopped at the Dan DuBois ranch, south of Gallup one day, where DuBois expressed sympathy for the toll all that hard riding was taking on the peppery Vander Wagon and his trusty mount, John the Flyer, a fleet-of-foot saddle horse who led just about everyone who saw him run into the deadly sin of envy. DuBois pointed further south and suggested Vander Wagon check out a place called Zuni, where Native people lived cozily in a village, lots of them in fact.
Vander Wagon found the pueblo village Dubois had described, then determined, like Joseph Smith, that this would be the place, not for a settlement but a mission.

The first buildings were hardly spectacular, but the CRC hadn’t been in the mission business long. In fact, Rev. Herman Fryling and Andrew Vander Wagon were just about the first to leave west Michigan for mission fields teeming with what they thought of as potential converts. The denomination itself was only 50 years old; there wasn’t money for a mansion.

In truth, the Zuni “big house” never was a mansion, although it had to look like some sharpangled white man’s palace to Zuni men and women and kids who lived in tawny homes piled one atop the other. When the big house sprouted up in 1914, there was absolutely nothing like it in the pueblo, nor was there for the entire next century. Nobody else had colonial windows, a spacious front porch, or a peaked gable jutting from a huge, swooping roofline.

It’s not all that hard to imagine what people thought when the big house went up. They must have been as ashen-faced as those missionaries were when they first snuck a sinful peak at the Zuni dancers from the three upstairs windows over the street. It’s just about impossible to imagine a cultural statement as foreign and in-your-face as “the big house” must have been when it went up, stud by straight-cut stud.

Let’s be blunt. It is hard to imagine a symbol of cultural imperialism as hugely omnipresent as the Zuni “big house.” If you want to megaphone your intent to change people’s lives and hearts and their whole way of life, what on earth could the missionaries do more effectively than put up the biggest, whitest house between Zuni and Gallup—or Zuni and Albuquerque? “Here we are,” that house preached. “Aren’t we something? Wouldn’t you like some of this too?”

Nothing could be more “American,” nothing more foreign to Zuni than the “big house,” an American Craftsmen design that could have been ordered from a Sears catalogue but was likely built from a pattern created by J. H. Daverman and Sons, house and church builders who happened to be Dutch and CRC and based in Michigan, a builder known, not surprisingly, for keeping costs down. Another sprawling Daverman home, probably the same plan, still stands at Rehoboth, just a bit east of the post office.

How the building materials the Zuni “big house” required got from Gallup to Zuni in 1914 is anybody’s guess, but what can be assumed is “slowly,” which is to say, by mule-drawn wagon. What a parade that must have been, wagon after wagon of industrial-sized Legos—everything a builder needed. When locals watched what was going up, some of them must have seen nothing less than a white man’s Trojan horse. Some still do.

For the record, America swooned over so-called “Arts and Crafts” homes for many years both before and after the First World War. Over 70,000 Sears catalog houses that look remarkably similar to the Daverman at Zuni were constructed between 1908 and 1940. You’d have to look far and wide to spot them in New Mexico, but out East and throughout the Midwest, similar homes still line city and village streets. But only one such monstrosity went up in Zuni, the missionaries’ house, the “big house.”

It was, for sure, an icon of the cultural aggression missionary endeavor often was—or at least
facilitated—a century ago. For someone like myself, a descendant of those who exercised sometimes unyielding control over the mission work at the turn of the 20th century and beyond, the big house, and what it so aptly symbolized, is something of an embarrassment. Nothing could be more out-of-place than a huge Midwestern frame house smack dab in the heart of a New Mexico pueblo.

But that was the plan. Richard Harms, editor of Origins, the Historical Magazine of the Archives of Calvin College and Seminary, Grand Rapids, Michigan, says that when Dr. Henry Beets of the CRC, then head of missions, suggested to his board that the new church being built on the campus of Rehoboth Mission look a bit more, well, “Southwestern,” the board disagreed because, they said, those Indians needed to catch a glimpse of “what might be.” Putting a big white house just across the river from the Zuni pueblo was more than a symbol—it was a statement.

Maybe it’s time that big house comes down, you know? Maybe it’s a crime it took an entire century.

But a house becomes a home once it’s lived in and with, no matter how monstrous its style or arrogant its placement. And this house, Zuni Mission’s two-story Daverman, has been home not only to dozens of families but hundreds, even thousands of guests, Native and Anglo. It’s tallied a full century’s worth of history of late nights and early mornings in rain and snow and wind and the hot sun of endless summer days. The big house heard a couple million prayers, lots of them said aloud and a gazillion more uttered in silence.

Real people lived in “the big house,” and real people have loved there too. They laughed hard, I’m sure, and cried and fought hard too, and some, regretfully, left in a huff. It’s seen more than its share of life.

But a thousand heart-felt reconciliations have been made beneath its broad, sloping roof, lots and lots of human stories, some maybe a bit too intimate to retell, all of that life sheltered and sustained within those four wide walls. One resident even acted as the pueblo’s only dentist and conducted a good business pulling teeth.

More than once it was emptied, of course, as residents moved in and out; but one sad night in 1971, the fire that ravaged the mission threatened the big house next door. Zuni residents came to the rescue and hauled everything out to the river. Kathleen Klompien remembers seeing her refrigerator tip when the helpers lifted it up and out of the kitchen; she will never forget things just spilling out as they dragged it outdoors all amid smoke and heat so intense it broke windows and blistered paint.

After that devastating fire in 1971, those who worshipped in the sanctuary that burned to the ground moved their weekly services to the big house basement, where the ceiling was so low that the hymns they sang had to rattle even those cement walls.

It should come as no surprise that the Zuni’s own solitary Daverman big house became much more than a strange-looking beast at the heart of the Zuni pueblo. Verna Chimoni, for instance, is downright disgusted about the demise of the big house. She claims it really should have become a museum because so much history was lived within its walls. She hasn’t forgotten professing her faith down there in the basement, where she also baptized her firstborn, a daughter. The big house wasn’t a symbol of suppression or degradation to Verna Chimoni; it was a holy place.

People lived there, after all. They ate and
drank, played Monopoly and Rook and Uncle Wiggly; they raised kids, had friends over, drank endless cups of coffee, baked ten thousand cookies at a minimum.

Once upon a time a family who lived there determined to ward off January cold by layering cardboard up against an upstairs wall. When demolition of the big house began not long ago and layers of everything were slowly peeled away, dozens of tiny holes showed up in that old cardboard insulation, marking the spot where a couple of brothers shouldered their BB guns and shot at targets and once in a while even themselves.

Bannisters became slippery slides. Fresh-faced volunteers arrived at Zuni, ate and slept in the big house, worked at endless projects on buildings and grounds, and then left, often changed substantially inside from the day they’d arrived. The boys from the preacher’s downstairs apartment once strung wires up so they could talk to the boys from the teacher’s family upstairs through a pair of tin cans.

One young teacher kept a pet crow in a back room upstairs until that crow took off and got thumped by a car at the intersection just outside the front door. Ouch. In a flash, that dead crow was salvaged by a Zuni who had to think himself as blessed to come heir to a supply of sable feathers for Zuni ritual. Pity the poor teacher.

That big Daverman was a house of many rooms—too many, one school principal thought, so he pulled out a sledge and beat down the wall between kitchen and dining room, then hurriedly stuck up a four-by-four when the ceiling above the dining room started to curve like a buggy spring. That admirable post will finally fall the day the big house goes down.

The big house, all by its lonesome in the Zuni pueblo, may well be a symbol of cultural oppression; but most of those who lived there in the last century can remember countless times when someone—male or female, young or old—showed up, any hour of the day or night in a level of turmoil that made being anything less than a good Samaritan unthinkable.

Not long ago, someone stood outside the pastor’s open window: “Father Meekhof,” he said plaintively, “I have sinned.” Poor man was confusing denominations. It was the middle of the night. After some conversation Pastor Mike determined the penitent wasn’t thinking straight, so he told the man to come in a more confident condition to do a vital confession.

Neighborhood kids will miss the baptisms regularly administered by Pastor Mike when, after supper, he showered them from the kitchen window, armed with the sprayer from the sink. For decades, the old fruit cellar held annual bounty to die for, and years ago an old auger-fed furnace kept kids’ noses warm and curiosities high.

There’s cause for rejoicing that the big house made it for an entire century because there were times, more than moments, when the future of the mission itself was questionable—during the Depression, for instance, when there were no funds; in drawn-out battles between personnel; after withering criticism from within the pueblo and without.
Among the darkest days was a time in the early ‘90s when a number of factors merged to put the Zuni Mission at great risk—low school enrollment, lack of funds, and other factors. When news got out in the community that the mission was tottering, people from the pueblo told Pastor Mike not to let it happen, not because they were Christian believers, not because they’d ever professed the name of the God those missionaries have talked about for 100 years; but because, they said, the mission right there downtown was itself a citizen of the community, a citizen whose presence, they told him, would be sorely missed. Such unsolicited comments were a joy, he says. When he asked them why they felt that way, some claimed they like to think of the mission as “a place of peace.”

Think of it this way. Long-gone supporters of the Zuni Christian Mission determined in 1913 that what the mission needed was a good new house. They went looking in the files of a Grand Rapids builder named Johannes Daverman, files they knew would offer a good economic plan, as good as any, and probably cheaper than Sears. They settled on the Zuni big house, a great big frame place some people might well have thought to be obscene, so white it was, so Midwestern.

If those missionary board members thought about architecture at all, they likely told themselves that if they were the ones living out there in a high New Mexico desert place, they’d like to feel at home. What could be finer than a big old house from the streets of Grand Rapids?

The big house fit in the pueblo like wingtips beneath a Navajo blanket, an ungainly symbol of the kind of perceived cultural superiority that made mission work doubly and triply difficult. And what really is one hundred years when the pueblo around still remembers those cruel Spanish idiots looking for the so-called “cities of gold”?

But it was still sad—for everyone who has ever been there, inside and out—to see that massive old icon come down because it was more than a huge, old house; it was home for hundreds of real people, believers all, and even a church when it had to be and maybe when it never intended itself to be.

Through it all, an entire century of mission life, the old Daverman has done far more than the Heathen Mission Committee ever asked of it. By God’s own design, it became a great big, ungainly blessing, a place of peace.