

When walls can talk

Romeros' home tells story of longtime Hispanic community

Photo by Sherri Barber

By Lorenzo Chavez

George Romero pauses every now and then, straining to remember his childhood days in the tiny adobe house at 425 10th St. in Fort Collins.

Sold to the city five years ago, the Romero House has been transformed into the Museo de las Tres Colonias to teach the public about Hispanic contributions to the city's economic growth, particularly in the sugar-beet industry.

The museum's Sept. 9 opening coincided with the annual Fort Collins Historic Homes Tour. It also helps kick off Hispanic Heritage Month, starting Sept. 15.

The modest home in northeast Fort Collins houses nearly 80 years of treasured Romero family memories. All but one of the surviving Romero children — Art, George, Frances, Toni and Juliet — still live in Fort Collins. Now in their 60s, they are proud of their parents' role in shaping the region's history.

FAMILY HISTORY

In 1927, John and Inez Rivera Romero built their house in the area of Fort Collins known as the Tres Colonias (Three Colonies), comprising the neighborhoods of Buckingham Place, Andersonville and Alta Vista (aka the Spanish Colony). The Great Western Sugar Company provided the land and materials for workers to build their own houses as long as they committed to living in the home and working at the factory for at

NORTHERN COLORADO'S SUGAR-BEET ROOTS — Graphic by Jason Melton

1899

The first sugar-beet processing factory in Colorado is built in Grand Junction. Between 1899 and 1900, the state's sugar industry grew from \$100,000 to \$3.6M.



Courtesy Fort Collins Public Library

1900s

German-Russian immigrants come from the Volga and Black Sea areas to work in Northern Colorado's sugar-beet fields. Some families make homes in Buckingham Place, a northeast Fort Collins neighborhood annexed in 1906, or Andersonville, another immigrant community plotted outside the city in 1903. A German-Russian neighborhood forms on Greeley's east side.

1901

Great Western Sugar Company's first sugar-beet factory opens in Loveland.



German-Russian immigrants
Courtesy Fort Collins Public Library

1902

Sugar-beet factories open in Greeley and Eaton.

1903

A sugar-beet factory opens in Fort Collins. In its first year, the factory has a payroll three times as large as all other manufacturing payrolls in the area combined. Sugar-beet tops provide food for cattle and sheep, and Fort Collins soon becomes the Lamb Feeding Capital of the World. Feed lots become a profitable endeavor in the area, and a sugar-beet factory opens the same year in Windsor.

1905

The Great Western Sugar Company becomes incorporated and begins to consolidate its Northern Colorado factories.





I thought we were pretty wealthy. We raised chickens, rabbits, goats and pigs. My dad taught us how to work and how to do for ourselves. We had so much love in that house.

— George Romero

The surviving children of John and Inez Rivera Romero, who lived in the house that opened this month as a museum, are, from left: Juliet Chavez, Toni Gallegos, Art Romero, Frances Maldonado and George Romero.

least five years.

Adobe brick construction provided a comfortable indoor temperature year-round, so the workers could keep living in the area rather than going back to New Mexico, Texas or Mexico in the off-season.

John Romero built his home with help from his neighbors. They made traditional adobe bricks by hand, using mud, sand, straw and clay from the backyard. The Romero descendants like to joke that nothing was ever wasted.

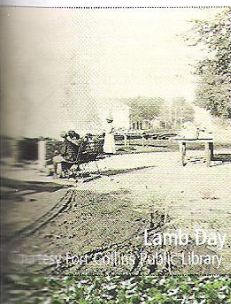
Everyday life was austere and inconvenient by today's standards. Without sewage or running water, the family relied on an outhouse. The dining room was next to a wood- and coal-burning stove, which provided warm water for bathing in a makeshift tub. Water was delivered monthly to a cistern until running water was finally installed in the 1960s. A "cold room" served as a refrigerator, but frozen meat and other items had to be stored in lockers in town.

Originally from Santa Fe, N.M., John was a hardworking provider for his wife and seven children, two of whom died as youths. He worked on the railroad and in the Great Western Sugar factory in addition to holding various construction jobs. He also served as the only Hispanic notary in the area and encouraged neighbors to vote in every election.

Inez Romero was a devout Catholic and an affectionate mother. Prayers were said every night at 7, and the children

1909

The first Lamb Day, a short-lived annual event, takes place on Oak Street in Fort Collins. About 10,000 people attend the free barbecue, and 200 lambs are slaughtered.



1910s

Larimer County ranks second in Colorado for sugar-beet production at the same time grasshopper infestations across the state lead to proposed legislation for pest control. In 1873 a grasshopper swarm attacked crops in Northern Colorado and drove settlers out of the area.



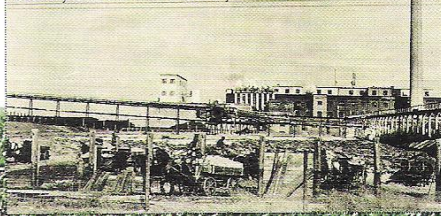
1910-1920

More than a million flee the Mexican Revolution and come to the United States. About 45,000 come to Colorado, many seeking work in the sugar-beet industry as a path to land ownership. Mexican-Americans begin moving into the Andersonville and Buckingham Place neighborhoods, and the area becomes known as the Tres Colonias (Three Colonies).

1914-1918

Anti-German sentiment during World War I prompts Northern Colorado sugar-beet companies to recruit Hispanic laborers. Businessmen close shop a few days a week to help meet wartime demands.

Fort Collins factory
Courtesy Colorado State University



1920

A sugar-beet factory is built in Fort Lupton. Colorado is producing 25 percent of the nation's sugar, and beets surpass potatoes as Northern Colorado's main cash crop.

1923

In order to secure a more stable source of year-round labor, the Great Western Sugar Company announces plans to build a "Spanish Colony" in Fort Collins. The project begins as six adobe houses in the neighborhood known today as Alta Vista. With materials furnished by the company, workers make adobe bricks and build their own homes. Each homeowner must sign on with the company for at least five years.

would walk more than a mile to the Holy Cross Catholic Church.

"Mom would send us outside to pray as we walked around the house, and every so often she would throw some coins out so we would find them — the power of prayer," says Juliet Chavez, 62, the youngest Romero daughter and the family's unofficial spokeswoman since the house was slated for a museum.

John died in 1975. Inez survived until 1999, living in the home her husband built.

George Romero, 65, takes his grandchildren to the house to reminisce.

"I was taking my grandkids there," he says, "and when I got off the bus, I could smell beans, pork chops and tortillas. Those smells have never left my memory.

"I thought we were pretty wealthy. We raised chickens, rabbits, goats and pigs. My dad taught us how to work and how to do for ourselves. We had so much love in that house."

HOME OF HISTORY

If not for the bright turquoise exterior, it would be easy to overlook the Romero House. Tucked away in northeast Fort Collins' Andersonville neighborhood, the house sits near condos and a Wal-Mart.

The city designated the Romero House a historic landmark in 2001. It is leased and managed by the Poudre Landmarks Foundation, which also oversees the Avery House and the Water Works building in Fort Collins.

The Romeros' four-room, 847-square-foot house is one of about two dozen adobe homes still standing in Fort Collins.

Thanks to the city's Amigos Commit-

Commemorative brick pavers are being sold to build a patio at the museum. The campaign is reminiscent of John Romero and his neighbors' group effort to build the adobe home using hand-made bricks. To purchase a brick, call Betty Aragon-Mitotes at (970) 416-9376 or Katherine Woods at (970) 224-5418.

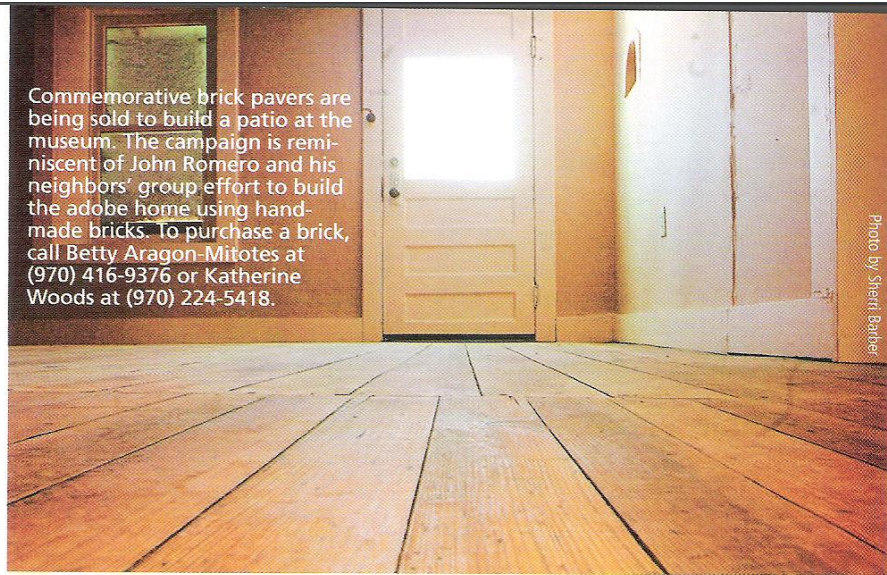


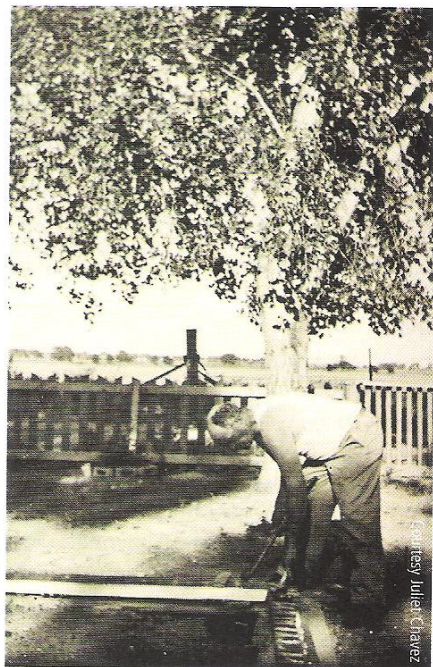
Photo by Sherri Barber

tee; preservationists; individual and corporate donors; and \$200,000 from the State Historical Fund, the Romero House has been faithfully restored.

Named Museo de las Tres Colonias (Museum of the Three Colonies), the house tells the story of German-Russian and Mexican immigrant laborers who contributed to Northern Colorado's prosperous sugar-beet industry.

"What was key to the Romero House was the strong support from the community and the city of this unrepresented cultural history," says Alyson McGee, public outreach coordinator for the State Historic Fund of the Colorado Historical Society. "The Romeros were an important family in Fort Collins' Hispanic community, and their story is the story of the sugar-beet industry and the economic impact on Fort Collins and Northern Colorado. It's a story that hasn't been told." ■

Freelance writer Lorenzo Chavez lives in Denver.



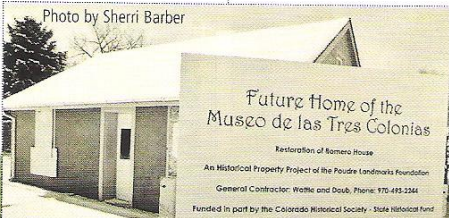
Courtesy Juliet Chavez

John Romero lays the foundation for an addition to his house in 1956.

1924

The Great Western Sugar Company creates the Espanola Subdivision at O Street and 25th Avenue in Greeley. More than 20 adobe homes are built in what's known today as Greeley's Spanish Colony.

Photo by Sherri Barber



1925

Fort Collins hosts its first annual Farmer-Merchant Party, where businessmen play host to state officials and Northern Colorado farmers.

1926

A sugar-beet factory opens in Johnstown.



1927

John and Inez Rivera Romero begin building an adobe house in the Andersonville neighborhood of Fort Collins. Wal-Mart Supercenter developer Mark Goldberg, with Fort Collins Partners I LLC, purchases the home in 2001. Goldberg donates the home to the city, which designates it a historic landmark. The home is converted into a museum, which opens in September 2006.

1929

The stock market crash in late October marks the start of the Great Depression, which takes a toll on Northern Colorado farmers facing drought and another grasshopper attack in the early 1930s. Thousands of Hispanic laborers in the state are sent back to Mexico under repatriation acts. By this date, Colorado has 16 sugar-beet factories, the most in the country.

1933

President Franklin D. Roosevelt establishes the Civilian Corps, a massive public-works program to provide employment during the Depression. In 1934 John Romero joins the Colorado Conservation Corps in Estes Park, becoming one of 3 million men recruited nationwide to build trails, parks and campgrounds. Each man is paid a dollar a day, or \$30 a month, and is required to send \$25 to his family.

Cherished history

Region celebrates farming lifestyle

By Juliette Fardulis

The buzz of activity from historical groups demonstrates that efforts to preserve rural history are alive and well in Northern Colorado.

"History is in," says Carol Tunner, historical preservation planner for Fort Collins. "Heritage tourism has a huge economic benefit."

In April, the city of Loveland denied requests to demolish the 115-year-old Feed and Grain building. Barry Floyd, who owns several buildings in the city's downtown area, purchased the historical structure this summer so that Novo Restoration Inc. can buy it. The nonprofit group has raised more than \$30,000 in pledges and has secured a \$200,000 State Historical Fund grant to put toward the purchase.

Novo Restoration plans to transform the historical building into a contemporary art center, an indoor farmers market or a cultural heritage center.

The Pioneer Association plans to publish a book in November titled "Pioneer Journey," describing the life of Northern Colorado settlers. The association cele-

brates its 100th anniversary this year.

At Pioneer Village in Windsor's Boardwalk Park, a Beet Shanty is scheduled to open in spring, celebrating the German-Russian immigrants who came to the area to work in the sugar-beet fields.

Loveland native Louise Osborn Gardels has established a private charitable foundation with her own funds in order to preserve a piece of her rural roots. The nonprofit Timberlane Farm Museum is slated to open Sept. 16 in Loveland.

"It's important for new generations growing up today to have some feeling of

why and how early farming was developed and the way people really lived," Gardels says.

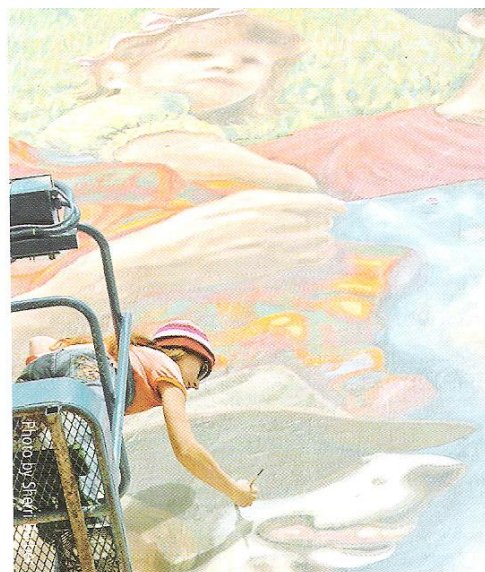
The living-history museum is located at Denver Avenue and First Street in Loveland. Gardels was born on the property in

1923. Her great-grandparents, W.B. and Margaret Osborn, built a log home in 1861 when they established Timberlane Farm along the Big Thompson River. The cabin deteriorated over the years, but original wood has been integrated into other buildings on the farmstead.

"One of my first memories was my dad



Louise Gardels, right, and her brother, John Osborn. Timberlane Farm Museum's grand opening is Sept. 16-17: timberlanefarmmuseum.org; (970) 663-7348



In a bold move to beautify a centennial building, two local artists decorated Berthoud's grain elevator last fall with a 30-by-50-square-foot mural of a farming family enjoying the fruits of their labor.

buying a tractor in 1929," Gardels recalls. "Even when the Depression hit, our family was not severely affected, since we grew our own food and made our own clothes."

David Brandon is director of Timberlane Farm Museum and former curator of the Loveland Museum/Gallery. The site of the museum at Fifth Street and Lincoln Avenue is land the Osborns once owned and donated to the city.

To Brandon, the region's renewed interest in preserving its past is "people trying to ground themselves."

"There is a movement to get away from impersonal technology and get back to tangible parts of everyday life," he says. "To get us back in touch with who and what we are." ■

Freelance writer Juliette Fardulis lives in Fort Collins.

1935

Gov. Edwin Johnson orders foreign laborers to leave Colorado. Declaring martial law on the New Mexico border, he calls out the National Guard. Later his actions are deemed unconstitutional.

1937

The massive Colorado-Big Thompson project to bring Western Slope water to the Front Range gets under way. Reservoirs include Carter Lake and Horsetooth. The project is finished in 1953.

1942

The Bracero Program, a temporary guest-worker initiative, brings 50,000 Mexicans to the United States for agricultural work and 75,000 for work on the railroads.

1945

Nearly 700 German prisoners of World War II help cultivate the sugar-beet crop in Fort Collins as labor costs rise during a wartime worker shortage.

1954

A decline in sugar-beet acreage caused by drought and high winds leads the Great Western Sugar Company to permanently close its Fort Collins facility. Most beets are shipped to Loveland for processing. The Windsor factory closes in 1967 as farmers switch from sugar beets to other crops. Factories in Eaton and Johnstown close by the end of the 1970s. The Loveland plant shuts its doors in 1985.

2000s

In 2002, about 1,000 sugar-beet growers from Colorado, Nebraska, Wyoming and Montana join together to form the Western Sugar Cooperative. The group purchases the former Great Western Sugar Company, which British firm Tate & Lyle bought in 1985, changing the name to Western Sugar Co. Greeley's factory becomes idle in 2003 and is put up for sale in 2006.

Sugar-beet workers



Courtesy Fort Collins Public Library