



## SPOTLIGHT

By Norman Kincaide, Ph.D., freelance writer-photographer and Rocky Ford resident

# PARTNERING FOR PRESERVATION

“FOR DUST THOU ART, AND UNTO DUST SHALT THOU RETURN,” truly is the fate of adobe, unless someone works to preserve it. Rebuilding and restoring adobe structures to functional use takes more than earth, straw, and water. The effort to preserve the adobe stalls at the Arkansas Valley Fairgrounds in Rocky Ford required the partnering of many groups to bring about the restoration and ongoing maintenance of these Depression-era structures.

Rocky Ford is home to the oldest continuously running county fair where, for 132 years during the second week of August, crops are displayed, livestock judged, and horses worked and stabled. During the latter years of the Great Depression, the adobe stalls project provided jobs in southeastern Colorado through the Works Progress Administration in 1938. This WPA project produced a rare, intact example of an exposed adobe brick structure.

If not continuously maintained, however, adobe brick structures are subject to severe and rapid degradation. Any lapse in maintenance of adobe begins the inertia of decay that ultimately leads to structural failure as bricks erode back into dirt.

Until the early 1970s, these adobe stables were rented out and fully occupied year-round. There was even a waiting list to rent one of the stalls. These adobe structures — cool in the summer, warm in the winter, and made of nontoxic materials — are great accommodations for horses. Furthermore, they are located next to

the race track at the Arkansas Valley Fairgrounds, one of the best in the region for training horses because of the quality composition of its turf. As a consequence of gradual neglect and inadequate maintenance, however, the adobe stalls were in danger of literally returning to the prairie from which they came. If owners and trainers of racehorses were to stable their expensive mounts in the adobe stalls, then they had to be maintained to a safe and operable standard.

Sally Cope, manager of the Arkansas Valley Fair, worked since 2003 to bring the adobe stalls up to a usable standard. A structural assessment was undertaken in 2004. Initially, the project anticipated a lavish undertaking with extensive renovation, landscaping, and contract work, the cost assessment of which proved unfeasible. Razing of the structures to build a new facility was also considered. The stalls, in the meantime, continued to deteriorate. Rebecca Goodwin, with Otero County Historical Preservation, nominated the adobe stalls for inclusion on the *2007 Colorado's Most Endangered Places List*. Goodwin made several points for their recognition: the stable is a significant WPA-era structure in southeastern Colorado, it is acknowledged for its historical value outside of the region, and the stalls were excellent accommodations for horses.

At the same time, Abbey Christman, Colorado Preservation Inc. survey coordinator, was at work surveying WPA projects in southeastern Colorado for the National Register of Historic Places, in an effort to identify and recognize the

structures for its 75th anniversary of the WPA. Identifying the adobe stalls as a part of these historic projects was indispensable in having them listed as an endangered historical site. The stables were of historical value not only to Colorado but nationally as part of the WPA era.

The adobe stalls were placed on *Colorado's Most Endangered Places List* in February 2007 by Colorado Preservation Inc. (CPI), a nonprofit heritage preservation organization founded in 1984. CPI launched the Endangered Places Program in 1997 to identify historic sites throughout Colorado in danger of being lost. In January 2008, the Depression-era adobe stalls were placed on the National Register of Historical Places.

After the completion of a successful volunteer project at the Como train depot, Jonas Landes, CPI endangered places coordinator, sought another site where volunteer skills could be applied to a short-term project. He also thought it might be fun to work with adobe. Goodwin suggested the adobe stalls as a potential project for CPI.

Goodwin called Dan Hyatt, Rocky Ford city manager, in the fall of 2008 to consider the project. This would be a low-cost venture by using grants, renting equipment, finding an expert to train volunteers and city crews for ongoing maintenance would be a low cost venture. Hyatt enthusiastically brought the project before the City Council in November 2008. The council approved and remains supportive of the adobe stalls restoration project.



Work in progress. Photo by Jonas Landes.

Completed work at the stables. Photo by Norman Kincaide.



Partners and volunteers. Photo by Rebecca Goodwin.

Once the project was endorsed by the local community, other partners provided funds: \$2,000 from the National Trust for Historical Preservation; \$2,000 from Colorado Preservation Inc.; \$1,000 from Otero County; and \$1,000 from the City of Rocky Ford. Construction focused on the western row of 25 stalls to accommodate an easily finished, short-term project to be done over a two-weekend time period.

Landes undertook the actual partner building, which included the National Parks Service's Bent's Old Fort staff, who loaned their adobe manufacturing equipment; Arkansas Valley Fair Board provided lunches to project volunteers; and Canyon and Plains of Southeast Colorado (formerly SECORHT) provided dinner on the first weekend workshop. Juan Espinoza, from the *Pueblo Chieftain*, with 25 years experience in working with adobe, contracted to train the volunteers to make and use adobe. Julie Worley, with Rocky Ford Economic Development, compiled a list of motels and restaurants for out-of-town volunteers.

Recruiting volunteers was achieved through the CPI — through its Web site, e-newsletters, CPI magazine, annual *Saving Places* Conference, and articles in the regional newspapers, *La Junta Tribune-Democrat* and the *Rocky Ford Daily Gazette*, as well as on the Canyons and Plains of Southeast Colorado Web site. Goodwin focused on the local area, while Landes concentrated on regional membership to promote the preservation workshops at the adobe stalls.

Local stakeholders in the project were contacted by Goodwin and Alan Urban, Rocky Ford management intern (a position funded by a Colorado Department of Local Affairs grant), who also acted as project manager for the City of Rocky Ford.

The primary partners in this preservation effort, however, were the City of Rocky Ford and Colorado Preservation Inc. The City provided a minimum of three employees before, during, and after work. They regraded the site on the west and north to provide for better drainage and cleared some 60 years of silting-in against the western face of the stables.

The workshops came off spectacularly, according to Goodwin. The first, held May 16-17, 2009, focused on making adobe bricks. CPI staff donated their own time to work with the donated adobe brick making equipment and two staff members from the National Park Service at Bent's Old Fort. Espinoza instructed on brick making which produced 1,000 adobe bricks in two days of work. A dry run on mixing the adobe the day before the workshop assured the proper mixing proportions. The second workshop, held June 27-28, 2009, focused on the actual laying of the adobe in the areas to be built up or repaired.

For the volunteers, the workshops were intended to be enjoyable experiences from which they gained renewal not only in the project, but from the skills they acquired. Each participant had the opportunity to learn every job in the

process from start to finish. An average of 35-40 volunteers worked on the stalls each day. On Saturday, work began at 9 a.m. and concluded at 4 p.m., with a break for lunch. Sunday's workday began at 9 a.m. and concluded at 2 p.m.

Stalls 1 through 25 were restored, except for the doors, which the City of Rocky Ford has contracted to repair with funds remaining from the initial project phase. The value of the volunteers' time was put at 750 hours, equaling 92 workdays, while 1,000 bricks were laid, and seven major holes repaired, representing 350 square feet of area filled. Total financial commitment was \$6,000. Value in donated time and labor was put at \$21,800. This does not include the increased value of the structure through the renovation. One entire structure was restored through a feasible, definite, stand-alone project. The adobe stalls will soon be ready for rent to trainers and horse owners. This project is also a priming tool for the City of Rocky Ford, to allow city crews to work on the stalls year round as time and resources permit.

Workshop projects like this provide priming mechanisms for municipalities to assess their own historical assets, take advantage of their own heritage, and make history live through preservation. This can be done economically through leveraging partnerships of those who are interested in working for historic preservation.