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"If it came from Wright's, you bought it Right": Charles A. Wright, Proprietor, Wright's Trading Post

NANCY PEAKE

A party of Indians in full regalia and war paint invaded the city room of the Los Angeles Times on the morning of May 11, 1912, and "treated the great crowd that assembled there to a veritable war dance." A reporter who witnessed this anachronistic invasion described the "New Mexico boys" as having "all the breezy twang of the West about them. Physically they are as straight and athletic as a lot of Apaches, but their war paint is all on the outside. They are ready to smoke the peace pipe with anybody belonging to Los Angeles."2

These same braves created havoc elsewhere in the city three days earlier, terrifying residents of the Paxton Hotel when their ceremonial snakes inadvertently escaped and "ran all over the hotel ... even getting out on the roofs of nearby buildings" before they were caught.3

Nancy Peake is a doctoral candidate in American Studies at the University of New Mexico. Her dissertation, in progress, is an oral history/biography of a reservation trader who lived with and worked among the Navajos for over fifty years. She wishes to thank Juanita McFarland for sharing her father's memorabilia in the preparation of this article.

1. Los Angeles Times, May 5, 1912, Scrapbook clipping, Charles A. Wright. All scrapbooks and photo albums are now in the possession of his daughter, Juanita McFarland. 2. Ibid. 3. Scrapbook clipping, May 5, 1912, Albuquerque. Unidentified, except with penciled notation. Hereinafter cited as Clips. Date and city given when noted.
One of the Los Angeles newspapers viewed the horrifying event in good humor and reported that "several of the snakes swallowed some bills and coin . . . and used the proceeds in getting on a glorious souse" before they could be taken to their rooms.4

The originators of this Old West excitement were in fact Nobles from the Ballut Abyad Temple in the frontier city of Albuquerque, New Mexico, members of the Shrine Indian Patrol. Their "chief" and founder was an Anglo Indian trader born in Kansas named "White Eagle," or Charles Arthur Wright. The miscreant snakes, some of which were "real rattlers,"5 and the accompanying drummers were authentic Hopis. Wright's Indian Patrol, adorned with jewelry from the glass-front showcases in his downtown trading post, enthusiastically performed Native American dances according to his instruction, "their success made possible by his thorough knowledge of Indian ceremonials, language and costumes."6 Chief Wright, an ardent hometown booster and up-and-coming businessman representing the new state of New Mexico, had this to say about the stunts his patrol pulled at the annual session of the Imperial Council in California: "The net result, including newspapers with an aggregate circulation of hundreds of thousands, will mean publicity in every part of the United States before many thousands of people."7 (Earl Pomeroy echoed this sentiment years later in his *In Search of the Golden West* when he said, hypothetically, "There is pathos and poetic justice in the spectacle of . . . businessmen doing snake dances in Indian costumes; there is also sound economic instinct."8)

Clearly, the West was "won" when it reached a point of marketability, when it could be sold to Americans living in the rest of the country. The bulk of the civilizing salesmen were ordinary citizens who displayed extraordinary drive and originality in pursuing an amazing array of jack-of-all-trades careers. News of their endeavors traveled East and gave credence to the notion that

individualism historically had found the most fertile soil in a new and untamed country . . . and stood as a symbol, as a pillar supporting the concept that a unique society had sprung up in the

4. As reported in above clipping.
5. Interview with Charles W. Wright, Charles A. Wright's son, Culver City, California, April 2, 1988.
wilderness, the dominant strain of which had produced a new breed of man. It was one of the West’s most potent myths. . . . To some it constituted a personal legacy, especially set aside for the individual.9

The West as we know it today was built by such individuals, men and women who responded to the myth as perpetuated in dime novels, railroad propaganda, and journalistic hype. They followed the lure of adventure and opportunity, believing themselves to be typical of the “new breed,” worthy of the challenge new frontiers offered.

Charles Arthur Wright was one such individual. He bought all the myth, lock, stock and barrel, and made a career of selling it to others. An Indian trader and entrepreneur, Wright marketed the tangible evidence of indigenous peoples who so colorfully personified that myth to the rest of the country. He promoted not only his business but also himself. He wholeheartedly believed in his product, the American West; and Wright spent his lifetime cultivating a persona that embodied all the characteristics of the proverbial western man.

His personal scrapbooks and photo albums—now in the possession of his daughter, Juanita McFarland—testify to his success. He was first of all an Indian trader, pictured astride a large white horse, wearing a western hat, surrounded by “Navajo bucks.”10 He was a hunter, tramping through snowy mountain terrain with fellow woodsmen, tracking bear. He was a speculator, buying and selling mineral leases, optimistically pursuing underground riches in the land of opportunity. He was a true believer who lived and mimicked the myth, donning Native American costumes, dancing to the beat of Pueblo drums, promoting the mystique to colleagues across the country.

The call of the West, combined with the excitement and anticipation of a new century, found a ready customer in young Charles Wright, working for the family business in the small town of Rosedale, Kansas. His father, who himself ventured west via the Atlantic from England, had established Wright’s Geyser Mineral Springs where, combining business with pleasure, he invited potential prize fighters to train. “A real character,” the senior Wright was reputed by his granddaughter to have “drilled the first oil well in Oklahoma. He made millions and lost millions.”11

10. Scrapbook photo caption, Wright.
When he was twenty years old, Charles felt compelled to seek his own fame and fortune. He and his friend Patrick J. Goulding left Rosedale in much the same manner as had earlier pioneers, in pursuit of the western dream. He described this departure and personal turning point years later:

Way back in 1899 among the Kaw Indians of Kansas, the Osage, Creeks, Ponco, Pawnee, Sious, Fox, Shawnee, Cheyenne, Arapahoes and Kiowa of Indian Territory and Oklahoma, Chas. Wright and a boy pal came to the conclusion that the Indian Territory was not the only place to find and trade with the Red-Skins. Rigging up a prairie scooner these two boys travelled overland thru the state of Texas, thru the Monahan Desert into Old Mexico.  

The young adventurers took three months to make the trip, hunting and trading along the way, encountering everything from "Desprados, cattle rustlers . . . half breed Creek Indians . . . catarmouts and Panthers," and eventually found themselves in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico, where young Wright landed a job as manager of W. G. Walz’ Curio and Cigar Store, initiating a career that would last his lifetime.

Charles spent the next three years trading "among the Tierra Mora, Myo, Oaxaca, and Yaqui Indians in Old Mexico," returning to civilization just long enough to marry Katherine Fulwiler in Abilene and bring the red-headed “Kate” back to Juárez. While the newlyweds quietly celebrated the beginning years of the twentieth century in the old Rio Grande border town, just 270 miles upriver the railroad was bringing boom-town conditions to Albuquerque, in the territory of New Mexico. Twenty years after the arrival of the Iron Horse in that predominantly Hispanic community, the Albuquerque City Directory was boasting that their city of 12,000 was “the metropolis and trade center of the territory.”

The architectural showplace and symbol of Anglo Albuquerque’s New Town was the Santa Fe Railroad’s Alvarado Hotel, glowingly described in a publication issued by the Albuquerque Indian School:

Of the many places of interest in and around the busy little city of Albuquerque, where the old world civilization and the new world thrift are mixed in more equal proportions than in any

12. Charles A. Wright, catalog draft for Wright’s Trading Post, 1920.
13. Ibid. Spelling here and elsewhere follows that in Wright’s journal.
14. Ibid.
modern city of the United States today, the "Alvarado" ranks first as being the most unique in its conception and the most perfect in its every appointment . . . . Neither the conqueror nor the cavalier could have planted upon the shifting sands of New Mexico so complete a little enterprise as the Alvarado Hotel.16

In 1903 Wright brought his young family to this promising new "metropolis." He was hired, probably on the basis of his trading experience with the Mexican Indians, by Herman Schweizer to work as a salesman in Fred Harvey's new Indian Curio Rooms in the year-old, $200,000 Alvarado Hotel.17 He could have found no more appropriate environment or employment for his final apprenticeship as Indian trader/

curio entrepreneur than to serve under Schweizer, the seasoned German patriarch and "Harvey anthropologist." 18

Wright spent much of the next two years traveling throughout the southwest Indian Country on buying trips with his employer, becoming friends with traders and Navajos throughout the reservation, and making himself known up and down the Rio Grande pueblos. He obviously enjoyed his involvement in all phases of the local native lifeways, for his collected newspaper clippings and personal snapshots—proudly marked "Photo by Chas. A. Wright"—testify to his presence at such varied events as the "Moqui snake dance" with Lorenzo Hubbell of Ganado, the Penitente rites in northern New Mexico, and numerous Pueblo dances and celebrations, often in the company of his wife, Katherine. Such intensive on-the-job training from the acknowledged authorities of the day provided the foundation for Wright's personal career. Judging by the lengthy notes he kept from these early trading expeditions, embellished with excerpts from railroad promotional travel literature, Wright was working hard at learning about the people and customs that were to be his future livelihood. Apparently he even picked up bits and pieces of various languages and dialects through his business and social interactions with the Native Americans and Hispanic locals, for years later he boastfully described himself—in a draft for one of his own business promotional brochures—as a "well known authority in Indian Languages and Lore, both verbal and sign languages . . . ." 19

Albuquerque, a featured stopping place of the Santa Fe Railroad, was the center of the new movement "to enhance the commercial exploitation of indigenous cultures"; 20 and the Fred Harvey Company at the turn of the century was the focal point of the retail industry of Indian curios. The Alvarado itself was the "Harvard and Yale" of prospective Indian curio dealers. Its museum collection rivaled the Smithsonian's in many aspects of contemporary Native American craftsmanship. Schweizer and Harvey's son-in-law, John F. Huckel, spent five years gathering archeological artifacts, both ancient and modern, representing North American Indians and the Eskimos, even including South Seas examples from the newly extended U.S. "empire." The Harveys had hired Charles F. Whittlesey to design the station hotel.

and the adjacent Indian Building to house their archeological collection of arts and crafts and various salesrooms. Mary Colter, schoolteacher and aspiring architect from Minnesota, was given the job of decorating the rooms in the Indian Building and arranging the sales items for maximum appeal—a venture that proved so successful it launched her into a lifetime career with the Harveys and the Santa Fe Railroad. Colter’s innovative ideas were an inspiration to the new recruit from Juárez. Such imaginative Colter touches as the settee swinging "on a chain from the ceiling in front of the fireplace, in which a log was always burning" later became prominent features in both of Wright’s own Albuquerque trading posts.

His associates and coworkers during the days of his Alvarado employment were the best in the business. Fellow Alvaradoans included James Mooney, photographer and ethnologist first hired by the Smithsonian to gather data on the Navajo and Hopi cultures, and Otto Haan, who in a few years would himself succeed Schweizer as manager of the Alvarado Curio Rooms and become one of Wright’s business competitors. The Wrights’ personal friends also included the family of Elle Ganado, featured weaver at the Fred Harvey Indian Building, "most famous weaver of all the Navaho squaws." Visitors and clientele at the Alvarado included the elite of turn-of-the-century public life and society. When Elle and the Albuquerque Commercial Club presented her personalized, hand-woven saddle blanket to former Rough Rider, President Theodore Roosevelt, in May 1903, the local newspaper reported that “Only a few had been told of the President’s desire to see the [Harvey] curio rooms and the doors had been kept closed all day. From the club the President was driven directly up to the front doors of the museum, where troopers were in line to keep the crowds back. Nearly a half hour went by while Mr. Roosevelt was shown over the place by the manager and the reception committee.” Salesman Wright, having carefully saved all the news clippings in his scrapbook, most likely had been an honored member of this committee and was surely sensitive to the merits of creating an environment so enticing as to attract the rich and famous, a fact he later bore in mind when designing the interiors of his retail outlets.

22. Clips, July 10, 1908.
23. Fred Harvey, “Indian and Mexican Building,” Fred Harvey Papers, Center for Southwest Research, Zimmerman Library, The University of New Mexico.
Riding along with the rising tide of tourism and the railroad’s increasing desire to romanticize the Indian, Wright, now chief salesman, traveled to the World’s Fair, the Louisiana Purchase Exposition of 1904, where he remained for several months in charge of the Harvey exhibit of Indian goods. While there, he rubbed shoulders with hundreds of imported southwestern Native Americans, including aged, nearly blind Geronimo, “still technically a prisoner” of the United States, but who by now “had become a fixture at [fairs and] expositions.” The famed Apache warrior was “[g]iven a booth next to a group of Pueblo pottery makers, [where] he signed autographs for a fee and sold bows and arrows to eager fairgoers. . . .” Geronimo was, “[b]y all accounts, the most popular feature of the Indian Building,” . . . “‘endearing himself to whites and Indians alike.’”

But even when Wright was home in Albuquerque, the Kansas-born curio salesman, a renaissance man of sorts, was not one to bury himself in his place of work. He soon made his debut in the Albuquerque cultural community by organizing and directing a Mandolin Club for which he was soloist. One of the club’s first performances in the Elks’ public theater included among the out-of-town guest artists Miguel Otero of Santa Fe, son of Governor Miguel A. Otero. The energetic Wright was also putting down roots and building personal contacts in places far removed from the local concert halls. A frontiersman at heart, he assembled a group of friends who liked to hunt and camp out. This clan of outdoorsmen created a Gun Club, and its members hunted everything from quail in “Corrallos” [sic], to black bear in the Jemez Mountains, to wild turkey in El Rito. The sportsmen even built a club house on Gun Club property near Isleta Pueblo for Sunday duck hunts.

On weekdays, however, Wright’s mind and heart were in the curio business. The paths of Mary Colter and the novice entrepreneur crossed again in 1905 at the Grand Canyon in Arizona. And once again her work would inspire the future owner/architect of Wright’s Trading Post. The Fred Harvey Company had commissioned Colter to design a building across from Whittlesey’s El Tovar Hotel to house their Fine Arts Collection and the Indian arts salesrooms. Her biographer noted that “she wanted to create a building that was appropriate to the setting, something that represented the history of the area and the people who

27. Charles A. Wright, scrapbook photos, 1904–1931.
had lived there"—a concept that would surface later in Wright's own prolific career. Colter's efforts resulted in the famous Hopi House, designed in the style of the Hopi dwellings at Oraibi. Charles A. Wright was sent out from Albuquerque to be its first manager. He and his family, now including two small children, moved into a small apartment above the "Rock House"; and Wright proceeded to broaden his experiences with the Navajo and Hopi cultures. His duties as Hopi House Manager included those of shopkeeper and Fred Harvey representative. He not only dealt with well-heeled tourists who visited the canyon by railroad, he was also the procurer of Indian goods for sale. The carefully labeled snapshots he pasted into his photo album are evidence that his job did indeed allow him to wear two hats—the businessman's derby and the Indian trader's western "cowboy" hat.

But Charles Wright was not the kind of man who could be content working for someone else all his life. After four years of learning the trade and its local peculiarities, he was ready to test the waters on his own terms. So in the fall of 1907, the twenty-nine-year-old manager of Hopi House resigned his position with the Harvey Curio Rooms. In October an Albuquerque newspaper announced that he had "purchased a half interest in an Indian trading store and ranch at Cónoncito . . . and expects to reside there." Cónoncito was a long, narrow valley about twenty-five miles west of Albuquerque where the Navajo "Chief" Platero had settled with his relatives and friends after they had returned from captivity at Bosque Redondo. Apparently this was "fine farming country and quite a number of Navajo Indians had taken up claims near by."29

Wright's friendship with Gallup trader C. N. Cotton, cultivated during his traveling days for Schweizer, served him well, for "Cotton gave him all the rugs he needed on consignment to start his own business."30 The successful wholesaler had established his trading company in 1894 after a friendly dissolution of his partnership with Lorenzo Hubbell. Cotton's huge inventory of reservation rugs was the result of his astute "regional control of two items basic to Navajo trade: Arbuckle's coffee and Pendleton blankets."31 The newly independent Wright could not have found a better mentor than Cotton, recognized as prob-

ably the first person in the Indian trade to make a concerted, well-planned effort to develop an eastern market for Navajo rugs.

Wright's personal experience with his Indian customers left a lasting impression on the isolated trader whose Cañoncito post was a long day's wagon ride from Albuquerque and civilization. That first winter was harsh, and the small post was constantly exposed to the ravages of blowing storms. Seven years later, warm and well-established in Anglo Albuquerque, Wright penciled his recollection of the time he found the near-frozen body of Espegay, brother of Navajo Medicine Man Chugay, not far from Cañoncito, and the following days of singing and sweat house ceremonies, and the eventual death and ritual burial.32

His photo album contains numerous candid snapshots documenting his trading ventures throughout Indian country over the next two years. As interesting as these rare and unusual photos, but much more revealing with respect to the contemporary Anglo regard of the Indian and his "primitive" culture, are the typewritten captions Wright provided throughout his album. For example, identifying a group of Hopi men seated on the ground in front of a cliff wall, he wrote:

The Hopi bucks neither own, nor build the houses in which they live. The squaws build the houses and own them. If Mr. Buck behaves, and weaves the dresses and clothing, he may come up to the fire place, dip his fingers in the pot and eat with the rest, and sleep in pease [sic]. Otherwise he is turned out in the cold world.

These ethnographic comments must have stemmed from a sincere desire to preserve for others the experiences this self-employed Indian trader was having among his Native American acquaintances, because several years later Wright filled the back of a 1914 day calendar with penciled notes of the Navajo Reservation and the Rio Grande pueblos, and his personal interactions with their inhabitants. Detailed descriptions of each pueblo indicate that the project was not a random exercise but that Wright had done his homework, much of the factual information, though not credited as such, coming directly, often verbatim, from early Santa Fe Railroad publications about the Southwest Indians. Well read in popular regional literature, he also included references to the writings of Charles Lummis. Perhaps, because so much of his journal writing seems to dovetail with his photo captions, Wright was

32. Charles A. Wright, personal journal written on back pages of 1914 day calendar, 46.
thinking of publishing his own illustrated guide to the Indians of the Southwest.

Although his trading post business was outside Albuquerque proper, he continued to remain active in the downtown social and cultural community, joining the Masons, and giving benefit concerts with the Mandolin Club. Despite his efforts to maintain his connections with the city, life in Cañoncito must have been lonely, if not unexciting, for a man pursuing the western dream. If he had happened to bring home the Commercial Club's latest "Booster Booklet" after one of his trips to town, he and Katherine would have read the following:

Seldom does one find a place where the southwestern Indian . . . can be seen to better advantage than in Albuquerque and the surrounding country, and nowhere can the southwestern Indian's marvelous handicraft be studied so well . . . In the city there are a number of stores handling these Indian and Mexican goods and curios, and which maintain trading posts on the reservations. It is unique, the impress of the Spaniards, of the Aztecs and the desert people on this modern city of commerce.33

And if what he had read so far had not yet whetted his appetite, what followed next would have spurred him on to immediate action: "Albuquerque offers the chance of a lifetime for investor, healthseeker, professional or business man or the man looking for success." It is not surprising then that in 1908, five years after he came to town as a Fred Harvey salesman, Charles Wright returned to the city, now "doubled in population," and rented from John Borradaile an old adobe building on the corner of Third Street and Gold Avenue, reputed to have been "a Gambling Den in the early days."34 Here he established his first trading post, "El Curio."

The cover of an early Wright's Trading Post catalog called out to rail travelers on their way to California via the Santa Fe: "Don't fail to see the most picturesque store in the entire west!"35 Inside copy offered specific directions suggesting an alternative to visiting the Harvey Curio Rooms at the station: "Located two blocks west of Santa Fe depot at Albuquerque, N.M., reached in five minutes walk. All trains remain thirty minutes, which gives you ample time to see the quaint 'adobe' Indian houses." Wright then continued with detailed descriptions of

34. Wright, catalog draft, 1920.
35. Wright, Wright's Trading Post catalog, prepared sometime between 1914 and 1917 as evidenced by a "2/17/14" patent date for "Skookum Indian dolls," 24.
The first Wright's Trading Post, corner of Third Street and Gold Avenue, Albuquerque, c. 1908. Photo courtesy of Juanita McFarland, Charles A. Wright family collection.
his post’s interior and various western accouterments, mentioning “the old adobe fireplace and many entertainments furnished to travelers in this room . . . Indian squaws weaving blankets, Silver Smiths and Pottery makers”—all sounding very much like the Harvey Indian Rooms where he had learned his trade.

Wright was also his own biggest booster. In a self-promotional pitch to his customers, the same catalog documents his business experience, noting that he had been “personally trading with the Natives for sixteen years, being able to speak their dialect, enabling me to collect the Genuine Indian and Mexican handwork.” He further attests to his “honesty” and reputation with references to the First National and State National Bank, “known to every banker and business man throughout the United States . . . and whose words carry conviction regarding the financial means . . . and promises of this concern.”

Thus assured, the prospective customer could lose himself among an amazingly diverse inventory, beginning with “the largest assortment of genuine native wool, fancy blankets to be found off the reservation.” Supporting this advertising claim, an unidentified newspaper clipping in Wright’s scrapbook, dated 1910, documents the receipt of a single shipment of “three hundred Navajo blankets by Wright’s El Curio . . . some of the finest ever placed on sale in Albuquerque.” Above an intriguing photo of Wright’s Navajo Rug Room, the owner/manager provides his catalog reader with a historically oriented sales pitch for the Navajo blanket, which “has become a household article of great value, for useful and decorative purposes: the designs . . . are a mystery of secrecy. . . . Each blanket we find woven with the secret legends and superstitions of the Navajo Indians.” Prices ranged from $12.50 for a small 3\(\frac{1}{2}\) x 4\(\frac{1}{2}\) ft. rug, to $125 for a 9 x 12 ft. rug. Wright also mentions “Chamillo and Chimayo Indian Blankets” (spelled both ways in the catalog) that—from either lack of real knowledge, Anglo ethnocentrism, or commercially inspired poetic license—are, he says, “woven by a tribe seventy-five miles northwest of Albuquerque,” with no mention of the true artisans, the Hispanic weavers whose families had been weaving in New Mexico for generations.

The eastern tourist could also buy “genuine Navajo bucks’ hand-beaten silver work” (for example, bracelets with turquoise sets priced up to $5), Apache bows and arrows, beaded bags and moccasins, gold rings and a wide assortment of “native gems.” Mexican-made items included “zarapes” and sombreros, silver filigree, hand-made lace and drawn-work, even “photo postals” taken during the Mexican wars showing “Battles, Executions, different Generals, Yaqui Indians, etc.” But perhaps the most unusual curio one could purchase at Wright’s
Trading Post (featured on the same page with lace doilies) was the “Mexican Dressed Fleas—a real common flea, stuffed, mounted and dressed up in a suit of clothes to represent some character.” Certainly the man some people later remembered as “hard-nosed” and “standoffish” displayed some sense of humor by including this item in his otherwise serious sales catalog.

Wright’s buying trips took him down into Mexico, throughout southwestern Indian territories, and as far away from home as Alaska. Among his own “souvenirs” of the Indians of the Northwest was a thirty-foot totem pole he advertised as being carved by the “Hida” (Haida) Indians, which stood on the streetcorner in front of his successive downtown trading posts (and is now at another “Wright’s Trading Post,” a clothing store/boutique his great-granddaughter-in-law owns in Manhattan Beach, California). Closer to home, local trips expanded his business and artistic connections to include the Taos and Santa Fe elite, among them Doc Martin, Arthur Manby, Bert Phillips, and Gerald Cassidy (who gave two of his paintings to his friend, the Albuquerque trader).

These were the early years of glamorous Hollywood and the new motion picture industry, and Wright was delighted that his trading post became a stopping place for movie stars. He photographed them in dramatic western poses, six-guns and all, in front of the adobe fireplace. His everyday clientele was diverse, from the tourist shopping for the cheap curio, to celebrities and wealthy Oklahoma Indians “who bought everything in sight.”

So successful was Wright in creating an “authentic” atmosphere that New York artist Amedee Joullin, “who had gained much favorable criticism from eminent connoisseurs for his clever and conscientious Indian paintings,” found the “local color” he was looking for inside Wright’s Trading Post. A local reporter touted—in a story headlined: “Southwestern Redman in Typical Post, Subject of Canvas”—that the painting of a Pueblo Indian squatting before the fireplace “promised to be a masterpiece.”

A booster from the beginning, Wright was well aware that his business future was linked to the commercial growth of Albuquerque.

36. Subsequent research by the author has determined that the pole has none of the Haida characteristics and is instead Coast Salish. See Nancy Peake, “Albuquerque’s Totem Pole,” 1988, unpublished manuscript.
38. Ibid.
39. Clips, April 20, 1910. The whereabouts of this painting is currently being researched.
Accordingly, he always cooperated with local efforts to promote the growing western tourist trade. Acknowledging his personal contributions in these community endeavors, he credits himself with the following:

Charlie is noted for his ability to pull off the real Indian stunts, when it comes to Indian Pow-wows, War Dances, Fire Dances, Squaw fights, games and races, which have been witnessed during the Cattlemen’s Convention and State Fairs. He is always ready to assist in furnishing these Western Sports for the entertainment of visitors and to help make their visit a pleasant one.\(^{40}\)

In his first year of operation the ambitious curio dealer participated in a local parade, and “Wright’s Trading Post was thought by many to have the handsomest display. A number of Indians in characteristic dress and carrying native pottery on their heads was the most characteristic New Mexico feature of the parade.”\(^{41}\) Despite this most favorable press review, Wright felt strongly that Herman Schweizer, his former employer and manager of the Fred Harvey Curio Rooms, had “attempted to block [his] display.” In an open letter to the management of the Twenty-Ninth Fair Association via the *Evening Journal* Wright stubbornly stated his case. Apparently, he had “engaged several squaws” who sold their wares at the station and had told them to report to him after the early trains had gone. Wright had “decorated them up with blankets and pottery” and had just mounted his own horse to start for the parade when another squaw hurried over with a message from Schweizer: “If they entered the parade with me or for me, he would not allow them to again sell their goods at the depot.” But the persuasive promoter was able to convince the women to carry out his plans. However, after he paid them at the parade’s end and they left to take up their places at the station, the women returned in tears to report that Schweizer had indeed carried out his threat. Wright said he had tried to confront the Harvey manager “regarding his sub rosa methods,” but was unable to find him; hence, his published outrage.\(^{42}\) This unpleasant incident and public altercation did not seem to dampen his enthusiasm for commercial participation in local celebrations, for five years later the Wright’s Trading Post Indians were reported as having

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40. Wright, catalog draft, 1920.
won the $25 second prize in the 1916 State Fair parade in the “best marching aggregation” category. 43

That particular State Fair was an active one for Wright who as “Superintendent of one of the Indian departments in charge of Indian events” was by this time a master at staging native extravaganzas. At one point during the fair competition, he was “forced” to intervene when one of his Pueblo olla racers collided with another, causing her water-filled olla to fall from her head. The ensuing scrap, complete with hair-pulling and throwing of pieces of shattered ollas, made for entertaining newspaper copy. 44 In another unfortunate incident, three wild rabbits the governor of Isleta brought for the “squaws’” rabbit race “passed into the Happy Hunting Grounds,” forcing the substitution of Belgian hares that refused to run. The busy Indian Events chairman was fully redeemed, however, when the Laguna Indians danced with their prized Apache war drums that had “never before been brought away from Laguna until induced by the Laguna governor’s friendship for Mr. Wright.” 45

These kinds of extracurricular activities had become second nature to the proprietor of Wright’s Trading Post. He thoroughly enjoyed dramatizing the public’s ideal of the western man. Through one such activity Wright made his most flamboyant impact upon the Albuquerque community. On May 31, 1910, he was elected to membership in the Ballut Abyad Temple, sponsored by his landlord John Borradaile. 46 Two years later Nobles Wright and Borradaile proposed and organized the Shrine Indian Patrol, its members to be “trained” by Indian trader Charles Wright. Throughout the next two decades this enthusiastic group of Anglo “Indian” ambassadors travelled across the country attending various Imperial Councils—causing a sensation in Los Angeles with the well-publicized “snake incident,” dancing in the streets of Philadelphia for the city’s 1926 Sesquicentennial International Exposition, and appearing in a command performance on the White House steps—always perpetuating the mythic West through their fully-costumed and Wright-choreographed renditions of Indian dances.

There might have been yet another dimension to Chief Wright’s “boostering.” Fellow Shriner Charles Lembke (prominent Albuquerque businessman and politician) was reluctant to talk about Wright because the chief would not “let him join” the elite Indian Patrol, telling him

43. Ibid., September 18, 1916.
44. Ibid., September 27, 28, 1916.
45. Ibid.
46. Ballut Abyad Temple, Recorder’s Minutes, April 29, 1912.
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he “couldn’t dance well enough.” Lembke suggested that “the only reason Wright formed the Patrol was so he could sell its members expensive Indian jewelry.” However, an examination of expenditures entered into the Temple Recorder’s Minute Book—which documents such varied and interesting items as wigs, material and labor on purple shirts, belt buckles, bracelets, moccasins, calf skins from Louis Ilfield for drum heads, and necklace rentals—reveals no payment to Wright specifically, except for the purchase of the peripatetic snakes.

Wright’s reputation as a solid community booster grew in proportion to the success of his well-established trading post. He felt confident leaving the business in the capable hands of his wife while he roamed the country buying Native American handicrafts or dancing with his Shrine Patrol. Then in 1916, when the ambitious thirty-eight-year-old entrepreneur may have presumed himself to be at the height

of his business and social career, "Mr. Wright was notified by owners of the Old Adobe that it was to be torn down."^48

The introductory page of the 1917 Albuquerque City Directory heralds Wright's determined response to this mid-life catastrophe:

A unique building soon to be erected is projected by a large curio dealer to replace their own building, for so many years one of the city's best known landmarks, and which was recently removed to make way for a modern office building. The plans call for a building after the Pueblo Indian style, both Taos and Zuni pueblos being drawn upon for special features.

At a meeting of the City Council Building Committee on May 25, 1917, which Aldermen Clyde Tingley and Wilmot Booth attended, Charles Wright was granted a permit to put up a $10,000 "curio store and warehouse in the Pueblo style" on the southeast corner of Fourth Street and Gold Avenue, "expected to be one of the show places of the downtown district."^49 Contemporary postcards and the 1918 City Directory listed both "C. A. Wright and E. Clyde Morgan, Architects." But Wright's son, Charles W., says that "although they were buddies and worked out all the architectural plans together, Dad did all the actual planning in the Pueblo style because he knew all about it. He never hesitated about the design." Always his own best salesman, architect Wright wrote that he "spent days making a model of the . . . building which is an exact reproduction of the Indian Pueblos, which was made possible by his many years study of the Architecture. When this model was complete, one of the Santa Fe Railroad architects of Chicago offered Mr. Wright a neat sum for it, which was refused."^50 In fact, Wright says a prominent Denver architect even promised to furnish him a site if he would erect his proposed building in that city "saying Albuquerque was too small a place to support such a building. But Mr. Wright refused to do this on account of the fact that the climatic conditions in Albuquerque are much superior to those in Denver."^51

Again, Wright had no qualms about billing his new trading post "The most picturesque store in the West," and more: "Headquarters for fifty-three different tribes of Indians and their curios . . . It is an exact reproduction of the Pueblo Indian Buildings built hundreds of years ago, and is the only true American Architecture as all other styles

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50. Wright, catalog draft, 1920.
51. Ibid.
have been borrowed from Foreign Countries." 52 Wright's labor of love became, in fact, a city landmark until it too was torn down and replaced by another modern office building in 1958.

But for forty years downtown Albuquerque had its own three-story pueblo, actively inhabited, during business hours, by authentic Native Americans. Each floor was recessed, with the roof below serving as its "front yard." There were round, dome-shaped bake ovens (hornos) on the upper corners where Wright's Indians actually baked bread. The "large dome shape" in front was a Navajo sweat house (a unique addition to this eclectic pan-Indian pueblo) where the "Medicine Man of the Navajo Indians put on a very elaborate ceremony." 53 Wright even lit bonfires at night in the Indian pots placed atop the parapets. 54 The eastern tourist who came to Albuquerque looking for the "real West" found it at the corner of Fourth Street and Gold Avenue in the Pueblo trading post that this western realist created "to fit the visions of these temporary pioneers with money." 55

Using intuitive business acumen, Wright sought from the very beginning to gain the community's personal involvement in its new landmark. A newspaper story announced: "C. A. Wright Offers Piece of Spanish Lace Work, Valued at $25, to the One Suggesting Best Title for His New Home." 56 The name was to apply only to the building, for the curios business would still be known as Wright's Trading Post. Nearly three hundred suggestions were received, and Wright had just about decided on the name "Hotivilli," but the winner was unanimously selected by those attending the opening when they heard the following poem submitted by Harold J. Keigwin:

Why change the name
   And spoil the fame,
Why not leave it Wright's?

You built your trade
   By efforts made,
Why not leave it Wright's?

Some Indian name, or Spanish, too,
   I'm almost sure it wouldn't do,
So name it Wright's.

52. Ibid.
53. Ibid.
55. Athearn, Mythic West, 131.
For visitors here, they wouldn't know,
And to some other place might go.
Just leave it Wright's.

To make a change would be a pity,
It's in the directory of the city.
Leave it Wright's.57

More than five hundred people attended the dedication ceremonies of The Wright Building on December 12, 1917. According to Wright's son, "There were so many Indians, there was hardly any room for Americans—all friends of Dad. It was a real show thing; they were dancing in the street and all around outside. And Dad didn't have anything to do with it. We heard the drums beating and went outside, and there they were."58 Apparently Wright's Indian friends were genuine, his son continues; they "liked him because he didn't cheat them. They came to him when there was trouble—sometimes government

57. Ibid., December 13, 1917.
trouble, sometimes land. And he helped them. I can remember going out to the Reservation with him, following along points of land that the White Man was trying to take away from them."

Among the honored guests attending the dedication was Dr. George Wharton James, author of *Indian Blankets & Their Makers*. His talk on the significance of Indian dances included appropriate references to the Hopi house blessing ceremony and tributes to the new Wright's Trading Post, "a credit to the builder, to the city, and more like the genuine pueblo than even the university buildings."59

A year after the new post opened its doors, and the second and third floors of the building were finished and rented out as offices, Wright began looking for new opportunities. Seeing a ready market in the "officers and men of Camp Cody," he opened a branch store in Deming, New Mexico, in April 1918, a few doors south of the Majestic Theater, bringing over many of his "choice Navajo rugs" from Albuquerque. The local newspaper, sounding very much like Wright's personally authored promotional brochures, lauded Wright's arrival, saying he was "not only a dealer in and authority on Indian goods, but is also considered an authority on Indian lore and languages and architecture, having spent many years in active association with various tribes in the southwest."60 The supportive presence of his wife is briefly alluded to in one Albuquerque newspaper: "Mrs. Wright remains here to look after this store." How long the Deming branch was open remains obscure, but the timing was such that the elusive presence of Pancho Villa must have added an interesting factor to this newest business venture. In fact, the following year, featured among the "museum artifacts" in the Wright's Trading Post catalog draft, was "one of Pancho Villa's buckskin suits all braided with buckskin in white and in various designs."

Back in Albuquerque, the versatile Wright, ever the paradigmatic western pioneer, designed and built the new family home on the corner of Twelfth Street and Marquette (now the home of prominent Albuquerque architect Antoine Predock). The *City Directory* had by now added the title "Architect" to the listing for the "Owner/Manager, Wright's Trading Post." Charles and Katherine built the fireplace themselves, hauling the rock from their property, "Wright Rancho," in San Antonio on the other side of the Sandia Mountains. This family weekend retreat,

59. Clips, n.d. Referring to the "new" Pueblo style architecture at the University of New Mexico initiated by President William George Tight, assisted by architect Edward Buxton Christy.

60. Clips, April 17, 1918.
eventually expanding to about ninety acres, Wright had purchased shortly after he arrived in Albuquerque.

The business letterhead for Wright's Trading Post—"Charles A. Wright, Trader since 1898"—lists, in addition to the expected Indian and Mexican wares, "Antiques, Real Estate, Oil, Mineral, Farm and Ranch Lands." As early as 1910 he had begun dabbling with mineral leases in Texas and Oklahoma. His personal record book of gas and oil transactions reveals hundreds of acres leased east of the Sandias, as well as several small ranch properties he purchased in the late 1920s and 1930s, some adjacent to his San Antonio property, others in the Rincon area. Confirming Wright's persistent pursuit of the mythical strike, his son said that his father "had this oil business on his mind and it took over most of his time. Mother took over the store pretty well."61

Wright would have been unable to maintain his active lifestyle had there not been someone he could trust tending the family business. Mrs. Wright was first acknowledged for her behind-the-scenes role in the 1923 City Directory, with her name now listed along with her husband's as "Manager" of Wright's Trading Post. Also that year another name appeared under the business listing of "Curios"—Maisel's Navajo Indian Trading Company, the firm that would become the competitive thorn in the side of Wright, the traditional Old West Indian trader.

But the next decade would bring hard times to the city of Albuquerque. "Tourism . . . wilted at just about the time when it had begun to flower."62 Although railroad passenger statistics bear out the grim news that tourist-related businesses were particularly hard hit in the thirties, local promotional literature seems to present conflicting data. Taking the stance of the optimistic booster, Albuquerque Progress reports that "1934 was one of the biggest on record for the number of tourists who visited New Mexico, being the first year the State went in for tourist advertising on a national scale."63 Undoubtedly, however, these were not "the best of times," and trading post owner/mineral speculator Wright was doubly hit when "fresh discoveries of oil in Texas and Oklahoma greatly increased the supply and sent the value of crude oil plunging."64 No wonder his frustrations sent him looking for someone to blame. An entry in his personal journal in August 1934 reveals the

62. Athearn, Mythic West, 93.
64. Athearn, Mythic West, 92.
status of Wright's curios business and suggests his assessment of probable cause:

Washington Government man in looking around. Said 5 years ago you had a big business. I said yes. The depression has put people traveling without money to buy luxuries and Maisel mfg and selling imitation jewelry. Ruining the Indian hand made work.65

Wright's daughter Juanita said her father "used to get upset about the Maisels' labelling of machine-made jewelry as 'hand-made Indian.' One day he went to Santa Fe and came home saying he 'had organized something' to make them label correctly."66 Robert Schrader, discussing the Maisel case in The Indian Arts and Crafts Board, mentions that Senator Sam Gilbert Bratton, Democrat from New Mexico, had received a written complaint from "a well-informed constituent . . . about the sale . . . of imitation Indian products in preference to the genuine article."67 Whether Wright was an instigator of the original investigation is unknown (the Bratton papers remain in the family's possession); but in 1933 "the Federal Trade Commission determined that Maisel's method [of Indian workers producing jewelry by means of modern equipment and machinery] had contributed to an increased depression in the Indian jewelry market beyond the effects of the general economic depression."68 Proceedings grew increasingly complex throughout the next three years, and numerous entries in his personal day journal referring to "the Maisel case," to Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes, and to Indians and tools, indicate that Wright was very much concerned with the progress of the investigation.

The multifarious personality of this competition-conscious entrepreneur had another dimension of which few of his acquaintances were aware. In 1934, when the child of one of his Hispanic neighbors near Wright Rancho in San Antonio suffered a crippling disease, Wright arranged for the child's treatment in one of the Shriners' Crippled Children's Hospitals. Entries in his daily journal record his concern, his arrangement of the rail trip home, and his telephone call to the "padre" to report that the boy "could now walk with crutches."69 By this time, Wright's curios career had spanned thirty years.

68. Ibid., 55-57.
69. Wright, journal, April 1934.
Brought up in the "old school" under Fred Harvey he had built his own business catering to the elite who patronized the Santa Fe Railroad. His ideas about his customers and the goods he offered them were based upon years of contact and experience, despite the fact that the rail "traveler" was yielding to the automobile "tourist"—the nation's east-west Route 66 only a few years away from becoming Albuquerque's "Main Street"— ushering in an era when vacation travel became available to the average American family. Juanita remembered that her father "did most of his business when the people came on trains—mostly wealthy. And when people began traveling by cars, they wanted cheap souvenirs. He was even rude to them sometimes."  

Leaving Katherine in charge of the store, Wright began spending more time at his mountain property working on the buildings and orchards, and handling "people problems" with successive live-in managers who were supposed to be taking care of the place. He still maintained a number of oil leases and related properties in and around the Sandias. But he never lost sight of his well-earned place in the downtown business community—that pioneering group of commercial risk-takers, whose membership had alternately encouraged and competed with each other while collectively planting their urban roots.

Wright sought to strengthen the position of his downtown monument by adding more rental space for offices, apparently capitalizing on the growing opportunities and expansion projects coming to Albuquerque with federal relief programs. The June 1936 edition of Albuquerque Progress carried the following blurb: "The two-story which Charles A. Wright, Indian Trader, is building next to his picturesque 'post' at 4th and Gold is nearing completion. A small addition has been built at the same time on the original corner building, just south of Gold, which will be leased for some small business or food stand."  

Wright was not the only curio dealer who viewed these years with optimism. Less than a year later the same publication featured the "new Maisel Building, designed by John Gaw Meem in the Southwest Indian Pueblo tradition."  

Business was increasing, spirits were rising, and the new year found local businessmen once again viewing the West as the land of new opportunities. Albuquerque was on its way to becoming the "sun-
belt crossroads"—someday to be known throughout the country as a mecca for persons seeking the material culture of the Native American.

The Wrights’ personal outlook on the new year was over-shadowed when Katherine was called to San Diego a few days before Christmas to help her daughter care for their critically ill grandson. Wright, as always, continued to visit his beloved Rancho on the weekends, recording his trips in his journal. This was an especially wintery January, and he apparently became chilled doing outside chores. Late one night, from his home on Twelfth Street, he called out to his next-door neighbor for help. After a short stay at St. Joseph’s Sanitorium and Hospital, the 58-year-old Indian trader died. The front pages of both Albuquerque daily newspapers noted his passing to the community. The *Albuquerque Tribune* story proclaimed on Saturday, January 30, 1937:

Chas Wright Succumbs here
Pneumonia Fatal to Pioneer Merchant
Ill but a few days

Charles Arthur Wright had been a visible figure in the Albuquerque business community for almost thirty-five years—whether riding his horse in a downtown parade, playing his mandolin for a society benefit, dancing with fellow Shriners to Indian drums, or standing behind the counter of his architecturally inspired Indian Trading Post. He had come west believing in the myth and spent the rest of his life exploring its potentials. But he was, above all else, an image-maker, a salesman who spent his lifetime marketing the myth—through his booster-oriented interpretations of the cultures that represented both his business and the future of his tourist-conscious city—and through his curios themselves, lying in glass cases and draped over the beams of his trading post—all tangible evidence that the mythic west was, after all, a romantic reality well within the grasp of the average American tourist.

After his death Katherine took over the business they had managed together, and for almost twenty years she continued the tradition her husband began at “El Curio” on the corner of Third Street and Gold Avenue in 1908. When Mrs. Wright sold the business to Sam and Marguerite Chernoff in 1956, she signalled the end of an era. For half

a century, there had been a Wright at Wright’s Trading Post in Albuquerque, far longer than at any other Indian-made crafts dealership in the city. When she sold the Wright Building, two years later, to the Bank of New Mexico, that unique symbol of a significant phase of local history was destined to share the fate of too many of Albuquerque’s commercial and cultural monuments. Underneath a photo of Wright’s Trading Post in its former days of glory was Charles Arthur Wright’s final epitaph: “Landmark to vanish.”