

Maria Martinez

Potter of San Ildefonso

Photos and Interview By Laura Gilpin

A short time ago, I went out to San Ildefonso Pueblo, 23 miles northwest of Santa Fe, to see Maria Martinez, the great potter and my friend of long standing. I took with me a large photogravure of a picture taken by Edward S. Curtis, the famous photographer, in 1905. Its subject was a corn dance there.

I was making a gift of the Curtis print to the pueblo. Before presenting it to the governor, I wanted to see how many people Maria could identify of perhaps 40 shown. To my surprise, she named at least eight among the dancers and chorus from that long ago.

Several friends joined us. There were "oohs!" at sight of the small cottonwood that today is a great tree in the pueblo's north plaza.

Maria and I sat under the portal of a son's house. It was a lovely summer day, no wind . . . only the rush of children running toward the tree in a field-day event on this Santiago Day.

We dropped into reminiscence about persons known to both of us. Maria spoke first of the late Dr. Kenneth M. Chapman, the eminent anthropologist. As far back as 1908, she said, Dr. Chapman "was the one to encourage Julian and me in our early pottery-making." Maria was shaping the pots and her husband decorating them with sure, skilful designs. This was the beginning of their lifelong achievement.



Maria spoke of Dr. Chapman's interest in the variety of design, the perfection of her pots, bowls and plates. (He expressed this admiration in his book The Pottery of San Ildefonso Pueblo.)

Maria recalled the late Dr. Edgar L. Hewett, first director of the School of American Research, who superintended early excavation at what is now Bandelier National Monument, west of San Ildefonso. She visited there when Julian worked with the archeologists. She also visited them at nearby ruins of Tsankawi, Otowi and Puyé.

"Dr. Hewett became not only a good friend of ours," Maria said. "He was a firm friend of all our Indian people." Similarly, she said, were such other noted anthropologists as Dr. Alfred V. Kidder, Jess Nusbaum and Dr. Sylvanus Morley, all now dead. *Corrected*

Maria mentioned Ina Cassidy, wife of Santa Fe's famed painter Gerald and an art critic in her own right . . . Edith Warner, who operated a celebrated teahouse near Otowi Bridge where scientists congregated during the wartime years of secret nuclear development *at Los Alamos* . . . *Mary* ~~Van~~ Stone, who helped many Indians sell pottery during years of association with the Santa Fe Art Museum. ~~(???)~~ It was through the museum, incidentally, that Maria and Julian first sold their now coveted black-on-black pottery.

Maria told me laughingly of a youngster who asked: "Grandma, how could you get those degrees when you never went to college?" The grandchild was referring to honors conferred by the University of Colorado and New Mexico State University.

She threw up her hands. "How could I answer?"

The answer is that Maria's education came with the beauty she brought to her art . . . an education at which she stands at the highest level as attested by many medals, citations and trips all over the country to demonstrate her skills.

Despite the bustle of modern life, San Ildefonso still lies quietly beside the Rio Grande, its people resting on a dignity born of generations and an acceptance of life as it comes. As Maria had accepted Julian's passing in 1943. She is about 86, and when I took my leave I was refreshed from her presence and newly aware of the deep richness of her life. She is a beautiful person.



A short time ago, I went out to the Pueblo of San Ildefonso to see Maria Martinez, my friend of long standing. It had been some time since my last visit. I had with me large photogravure reproduction of a photograph by Charles Curtis of a Corn Dance at the North side of San Ildefonso which Mr. Curtis had made in 1905. I had recently acquired this print and felt that it should belong to the People of the Pueblo. Before presenting it to the Governor, I showed it to Maria as I was anxious to see how many people in the picture she could identify. To my surprise she named at least eight. Of great interest to all the picture who saw it that day was the size of the now great cottonwood in the north plaza; they couldn't believe that it could have been that small. Maria

Maria and I were sitting on the portal of her son's house. It was a lovely summer day, no wind, everything quiet until many of the Pueblos children appeared to take part in a field day event. They gathered around the great cottonwood and commenced playing games of all sorts, with much laughter and a feeling of good times. There were races and a variety of competitive events that added a feeling of life and life to the otherwise quiet village. Maria

Maria and I dropped into reminiscence speaking of the many persons both of us had known in the past. She spoke first and so warmly of Dr. Kenneth Chapman. This, of course was as it should be, for Dr. Chapman was the one who encouraged both Maria and her husband Julian to work long and hard on their building a long and great tradition and achievement pottery, Maria shaping the pots, and Julian decorating them. She remembered that she had known Dr. Chapman since 1908 when he first came to the Pueblo to see her and to watch her work. She



spoke of his great interest in the designs that she and Julian used for decoration and as we know to-day, his study was finally presented to all in his book on San Ildefonso pottery published by the School of American Research.

Maria spoke also of Dr. Hewitt who made excavations at Bandelier. She and Julian used to go there to watch the archaeologists at their work. She also visited them at work and at Tsankawi, ~~xxx~~ at Puye, at Otowi. She spoke of other archaeologists she had known, Dr. Kidder who worked at Pecos; of Dr. Harrington; of Jess Nusbaum and Dr. Sylvanus Morley. She knew all these great scientists and remembered them so vividly. She spoke of Ina Cassidy, of Edith Warner, and Mrs. Van Stone who used to be a dear friend when she took such an active part in the Art Museum in Santa Fe. She spoke of Mr. Connell and the boys School at Los Alamos and of the great change when Los Alamos became the great scientific Laboratory it now is, and all the secrecy that existed during those war years. She spoke of the changes and growth of Santa Fe, and of the slow development to education at the Pueblo. She spoke of the degrees which have been conferred on her, one from the University of Colorado, another from Las Cruces. And she laughingly told of a grandchild who asked her how she could have gotten a degree when she never went to school. "School"? Her education came from the perfection she had developed in her long life as a potter, a field in which she stands at the very top. ~~xxx~~

With all the changes, the hustle bustle of modern life, the Pueblo of San Ildefonso lies quietly beside the Rio Grande and the Pueblo Indians who live there rest on their quiet dignity and their acceptance of life as it comes. I left this serene