

Visit...

## ARROYO SECO

• NEW MEXICO •

by JEANIE CLINTON

**A**rroyo Seco. Look west and gaze upon the high plains desert. To the east, the view is evergreen covered mountains. Located in the New Mexico foothills of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains, Arroyo Seco is a crossroads of ecosystems, cultures, and traditions. Seven miles to the south lies the town of Taos, and nine miles to the northeast is the Taos Ski Valley. The winding road that connects the two passes directly through the center of Arroyo Seco village.

The name Arroyo Seco means dry gully, but in fact, the village is located on an important drainage in the region, and water can be reached just a few feet below the surface. Farming and ranching have been the mainstay of the valley for centuries. In 1598, Juan de Oñate, accompanied by 130 families, came into northern New Mexico and claimed the territory for Spain. Settlers established home sites and the acequia system (a web of irrigation ditches) for bringing water to their crops and livestock. This age old system still exists and is a crucial part of daily life. Each acequia has its own governing body headed by the mayordomo and a set of strict rules concerning water usage. Water has always been the lifeblood of the region and remains of the utmost importance to this day.

The heart of the Arroyo Seco community is La Santísima Trinidad (Holy Trinity) Church completed in 1834. The old church was lovingly and painstakingly restored in the late 1990s. A historic



altar screen depicting the Holy Trinity is the centerpiece of the sanctuary. Outside, the cemetery is adorned with flowers and native plants and leads to the plaza surrounding the church.

An important religious aspect of life in Arroyo Seco is the Penitente Brotherhood which began sometime between 1776 and 1833. This was the period when the Catholic Church in the region was in disarray. Only a very few priests were available to minister to the wide geographic area. The growth of Hispanic population demanded more attention to the spiritual needs

▼ La Santísima Trinidad Church



of the people. Los Hermanos Penitentes, a lay organization, was formed to fill this ecclesiastical void. The Morada was their chapter house and place of worship. The Morada in Arroyo Seco is still an active center of the spiritual community.

The history of Arroyo Seco predates the Spanish incursion by several centuries. Evidence of semi-nomadic people dating from 800 AD has been unearthed in recent times. The Taos Pueblo (a Tiwa speaking nation) had roots in the area for at least 250 years before the Oñate exploration. The Taos Pueblo lands border Arroyo Seco, separated by a line of giant cottonwood trees and the Rio Lucero. The pueblo land is a sea of sage with cattle, buffalo, and horses grazing amid the sparsely placed home sites. The actual Taos Pueblo, a traditional pueblo structure, lies farther to the south. In an effort to keep the old ways, electricity and running water are not allowed inside the pueblo walls. Harmony reigns between Arroyo Seco and Taos Pueblo in most cases, but some water priority issues still remain to be resolved.

Until the early 1950s, Arroyo Seco had basically been isolated from the outside world. Geographic barriers like the peaks of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains on the east and the Rio Grande Gorge on the west tended to insulate the region. Limited toleration for outsiders helped to fortify invisible walls around the village. The introduction of skiing was the catalyst for change in the once quiet hamlet.



▲ The Arroyo Seco Mercantile with Francesca's Clothing Boutique in the background

Ernie Blake established the Taos Ski Valley which brought jobs to area residents but also impacted the water usage and traffic on the road through Seco. Since that time, tourism from the ski industry has added a new dimension to the cultural mix. The increased diversity has helped to bring new prosperity to Arroyo Seco, but at the same time newcomers as well as those with extended generational ties are serious about preserving the past.

Honoring traditions of the respective cultures here in northern New Mexico is a way of life and key to peace and goodwill in the community. Whether the tradition is Native American, the acequia culture of the Hispanic farmer, the spiritual ceremonies of the Penitentes, or resource conservation issues, all are considered important and hold the respect of the community.

The quaint beauty of the old adobes that line Highway 150 is definitely worthy of

preservation. Recent restoration efforts by Andy Burns have saved several of the old adobes around Seco Plaza. Taos Sunflower Specialty Yarns is housed in one of those beautifully restored historic adobe buildings. Located in the Seco Plaza behind the Gypsy 360 Café, Taos Sunflower is a veritable oasis for knitters, featuring high end yarns, tools, and an extensive collection of books. Shop hours are Tuesday through Saturday from 9:30 am to 4:00 pm and Sunday from 10:30 am to 4:00 pm. Taos Sunflower can be reached at (505) 776-5644 and accessed on the web at [www.taosunflower.com](http://www.taosunflower.com).

The large two story territorial adobe that sits adjacent to Hwy 150 has been immaculately restored and is now the home of Doug West Gallery, featuring the original artwork of Doug West and also representing outstanding artists working in sculpture, pottery, and jewelry. The gallery is

open Wednesday through Saturday from 10:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. The web address is [www.dougwestart.com](http://www.dougwestart.com). Also located there are Gary Embler Architect, who has been creating sustainable regional architecture since 1980, and Rivers and Birds, an educational nonprofit organization. Rivers and Birds offers outdoor natural history classes such as Birding by Ear and Field Geology, wildlife and ecological film events, and award winning hands-on children's programs. They celebrate the natural heritage and cultural traditions of New Mexico through these experimental projects and their unique documentary film about the region, *Nuestras Acequias*. They are available at (505) 776-5200 or [www.riversandbirds.org](http://www.riversandbirds.org).

The Abominable Snowmansion, located diagonally to the west of Seco Plaza, is a hostel housing young travelers in the sum-



▲ The Gypsy 360 Café

mer and skiers in the winter. The private rooms, cabins, and dorms are inexpensive and great lodging for all ages. All guests have full use of the big kitchen. Internet is available as well as pool table games, frisbee, and ping pong. Tipis are also available for a more adventurous overnight stay. Contact them at (505) 776-8298. This old adobe was actually one of the first stores in Arroyo Seco. Adolph Gusdorf, who was also the first postmaster in the village, moved to the area around 1807, about the time that gold was discovered at Twinning (now the Taos Ski Valley). Old timers in town still remember A. Gusdorf and Brothers General Merchandise. Although settlers inhabited the region over a hundred years earlier, 1806 is considered the founding date of Arroyo Seco.

Just south of the old church is Arroyo Seco Mercantile. This adobe building was built in 1895 for use as a general store. Staples were bought, sold, and traded here for many years. In the mid fifties, the store closed and was then used for a myriad of purposes. In 1999, owner Jeanie Clinton and long time friend Karen

▼ The J. Bradford Pottery Studio & Gallery



▲ The Taos Cow

Barnwell reopened the general store as Arroyo Seco Mercantile, boasting an incredible selection of goods. Blankets, books, jewelry, antiques, and vintage items from the old west, as well as tools, lawn and garden items, hardware, and nails by the pound are only some of the items available at the Merc. The store's 1950 Chevrolet truck has become the town's unofficial mascot. Many sunny afternoons you can see artists set up by the Mercantile painting their version of the old truck. "New Stuff, Old Stuff and Stuff You Need" is the Mercantile motto. Visit them online at [www.ArroyoSecoMercantile.com](http://www.ArroyoSecoMercantile.com). The Mercantile is open seven days a week.

Claire Works Gallery is located in a new, but old looking, territory style adobe that is visible to the northeast of the Seco Plaza. This is a delightful art space and sculpture garden featuring the unique art and jewelry of well known personality Claire L. Haye. Claire's original jewelry in sterling silver, gold, and bronze has an avid national following.

Immediately next door is the home of the Taos Land Trust, a non-profit land

conservation organization founded in 1988 to help preserve the natural and cultural landscapes, wildlife habitat, and extraordinary natural beauty of the Taos area. They help residents protect their family lands through conservation easements, partner with other organizations to secure major public land acquisitions, and work with local government on long range land use planning. Since 1988, they have permanently protected approximately 22,000 acres throughout northern New Mexico including the important acquisition of the Taos Valley Overlook and Ute Mountain near Costilla.

Fine printing is found at Jack Leutsig Imaging. Publishing the art of many of New Mexico's most accomplished artists, JLI's Galleries are open to the public Monday through Saturday. See works on canvas and paper by Wm Acheff, Ed Sandoval, Kevin MacPherson, Leigh Gusteron, Bill Ranh, and many others. More information is available at [www.jliprints.com](http://www.jliprints.com).

Scott Carlson Pottery, on the river side of Hwy 150, has live pottery demonstra-

▼ Scott Carlson Pottery



▼ The Doug West Gallery





▲ Abe's Cantina

tions daily. The gallery features hand thrown original pottery by Scott Carlson. This pottery is functional, yet captures the colors of the southwest.

Abe's Cantina and Cocina has been providing food and drink for the village for more than 25 years. Abe, Olympia, Lena, and Lucio greet customers daily with delicious northern New Mexico fare. This is the place to go for the best ever breakfast burritos. Abe's Cantina is also considered the unofficial town hall of Arroyo Seco.

Antiquarius Imports is a direct importer and wholesaler of tribal rugs, furniture, and accessories. Owner Conan Brooks travels around the world collecting unusual objects which he imports and offers at wholesale prices from his shop in Arroyo Seco. To find out more, check out [www.antiquariusimports.com](http://www.antiquariusimports.com).

Bordering the Rio Lucero is the Taos Cow Café and Deli where the community gathers for good food, good conversation, and Taos Cow Ice Cream. Started in Arroyo Seco 12 years ago, the ice cream factory has grown exponentially and now provides Taos Cow Ice Cream to fine res-

▼ The home of Claire Works Gallery



taurants and cafes across New Mexico. It comes in many delicious flavors, but the great thing about it is the natural ingredients and RBGH free dairy products that are used in making it. Taos Cow is on the web at [www.taoscow.com](http://www.taoscow.com).

In the sunny yellow adobe midway up the main street, the Fidget Gallery offers hand painted textiles and home accessories. Owner and award winning artist Alison Traister lives and paints locally, infusing Fidget with her beautiful, witty, vibrant designs. The intense color really gets space singing! Paintings, wall hangings, tablecloths, Euroshams, and pillows fill the gallery. Her web address is [www.fidgetgallery.com](http://www.fidgetgallery.com).

Neighboring the Arroyo Seco Mercantile is J. Bradford Pottery. The pottery studio and gallery features decorative as well as functional ceramics. John focuses on the wood-fired process and high temperature firings. Check out [www.bradfordpottery.com](http://www.bradfordpottery.com) for more information.

The northernmost store on Hwy 150 in Arroyo Seco is Francesca's Clothing

▼ In the background, the Abominable Snow Mansion



▲ The Fidget Gallery offers hand painted textiles & home accessories.

Boutique. This very fashionable boutique features cotton and silks from India, Nepal, and Thailand. You'll find skirts, wrap pants, halters, sarongs, and Hardtrail activewear. This shop has been voted best in its category in Taos County.

The quiet charm and extraordinary beauty of Arroyo Seco is evident in every season. The El Salto and Lucero Peaks that tower over the village stand frozen white with snow and ice through the winter. Rainbows, red willows, and wild flowers hail the spring, while summer is graced by bluebirds and cherry, apple, and wild plum blossoms. In fall, through the alchemy of northern New Mexico nature, the aspens and cottonwoods are changed into gold, covering the mountainsides, valleys, and all in between.

This year, Arroyo Seco is celebrating its 200th anniversary. This would be the perfect time to experience for yourself the natural New Mexico beauty juxtaposed with the many traditional and cultural aspects of Arroyo Seco. ■

▼ The Taos Sunflower

