

AMELIA ELIZABETH WHITE BIOGRAPHY

Amelia Elizabeth White was born (1878) into a world of culture and privilege on the upper east side of Manhattan. Her father – Horace White – had covered the Lincoln-Douglas Debates and eventually became the editor-in-chief and owner of *The Chicago Tribune* and *The New York Evening Post* as well as being instrumental in the founding of *The Nation*. Over his lifetime, Horace White amassed a fortune through investments in railroads and other business.

Amelia – who was barely five feet tall - was described by a friend as “...a tiny little thing. She weighed perhaps not quite 90 pounds, but she had a brain on her like steel wool.”

In August 1913, after graduating from Bryn Mawr College in 1901, Elizabeth traveled to New Mexico for the first time to visit a former classmate living on a ranch near Wagon Mound. There she encountered archeologists and visited many geological and anthropological sites. After visiting Santa Fe for the first time to celebrate her 35th birthday, Amelia declared New Mexico to be “Heavenly country.”

In June 1916, Amelia went to St. Valery, France for a two-year stint as a Red Cross Volunteer in French and Belgian hospitals as World War I raged. Her sister Martha joined her in 1917 and the two of them served at La Panne until 1918. Amelia was decorated by the Queen of Belgium for her service and continued to volunteer in a Paris hospital until the end of 1918.

During this time, Amelia’s father passed away (September 1916) and upon her return to America, Amelia and Martha each received about \$55,000 in yearly income from their father’s estate that allowed them to set up their independent lifestyle and be financially secure for life.

In 1923, though Amelia and Martha planned to live in New York City, the sisters took a car journey – in a Lincoln Touring car – that would change their lives. En route to California to view a solar eclipse at Mount Palomar, they stopped in Santa Fe to, of all things, get their hair done and ended up buying land... Or so the story goes.

Santa Fe had so captivated the White sisters; they decide to reside here full time.

Amelia and Martha found their new home in Santa Fe along a dusty, dirt track, frequented by sheep and goat herds, on the southeastern edge of town, on Garcia Street.

Over the next few years, the sisters transformed their property into an elaborate, Santa Fe-style compound complete with guest houses, dog kennels (for their beloved Irish Wolfhounds), stables, along with a swimming pool and tennis court – the first of their kind in Santa Fe.

They called their compound *El Delirio* – The Madness – after a bar in Seville, Spain near the hotel where the sisters often stayed.

This delightfully eclectic estate would serve as a gathering place for artists, writers, musicians, intellectuals, anthropologists, and archeologists during the 1920s and 1930s. Amelia would reside at *El Delirio* until her death in 1972.

Amelia soon became one of the most influential women (sadly unrecognized and underappreciated) in the state of New Mexico as Santa Fe developed from a sleepy trading post into the center of art and culture it is today.

Land and its development were a major focus of Amelia's life's work.

In 1924, owning nearly 250 acres on Santa Fe's eastside, she formed the Da Vargas Development Corporation for the purpose of acquiring and developing land "That would capture the character and flavor of the best of Santa Fe."

Amelia and Martha became instrumental in the evolution of a "Santa Fe style" of architecture - based on the principle that new housing and development could be built using traditional methods, materials and design and still serve the modern citizen.

Endorsing the Spanish-Pueblo style of architecture, the De Vargas Development Corporation attached covenants to sale of their properties restricting building style and future conveyances.

"No building, except a private dwelling, shall be erected, and said dwelling house and necessary outbuildings shall be in the Old Santa Fe or Pueblo-Spanish style of architecture."

The White sisters were also founding members of the Old Santa Fe Association and became members of the city's first formally chartered planning commission.

Amelia soon became a community activist in Santa Fe concerned with Native American arts, preserving Native lands and culture and Native American health.

It was her desire to demonstrate the contribution of the First Americans to our culture. She worked to promote a broader acceptance of Native American art as "Indian art as art, not ethnography", believing that "Indian art had a vitality not found in European art."

Amelia fought passionately on behalf of Native American peoples to resist official US government policies of forced assimilation. And, as a proponent of Native American health care, sponsored many surveys of the health and welfare of the Pueblos.

Amelia's legacy did not stop there.

She was the regional director of Dogs for Defense during World War II. This being a direct result of she and Martha breeding their beloved Irish Wolfhounds at *El Delirio*.

Amelia was instrumental in founding the Laboratory of Anthropology, the Old Santa Fe Association, the Santa Fe Animal Shelter (in loving memory of her sister Martha who died of cancer in 1937), the Santa Fe Indian Market and Garcia Street Club (founded in 1945 as a community center for Santa Fe's children and still exists today).

Upon her death, Amelia willed her lands and holdings to SAR as a legacy gift, which included Sena Plaza. She also donated land for the construction of the Laboratory of Anthropology, the Wheelwright Museum of the American Indian, the Museum of Navajo Ceremonial Art, the Folk Art Museum, and the Santa Fe Botanical Garden (having previously donated the land to the City of Santa Fe).

This formidable woman left a legacy that is still felt to this day. Currently, her name does not grace any buildings and there is but one plaque that recognizes *El Delirio* as her former home... yet nothing about her charitable, altruistic, public-minded works. A single public park is the only location in Santa Fe that bears her name and was also her gift to the city for the enjoyment of all people.