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Frieda Lawrence and the D. H. Lawrence Ranch

From 1912 when Frieda (1879-1956) left the security of her British middle-class life until 1933 when Lawrence's estate was settled and she returned to her mountain ranch seventeen miles north of Taos, New Mexico, she had no permanent home, but she never mourned the loss of a bourgeois lifestyle.

When it became clear that she, a German baroness (née von Richthofen), was going to stick with Lawrence, a coal miner's son, and not return to her three young children and husband (Lawrence's former French professor at University College Nottingham), her father, a former Prussian officer, wrote, "You travel about the world like a barmaid," she remembered.

It was a grief to him who loved me, that I was so poor, and socially impossible. I only felt wonderfully free, "vogelfrei" indeed. To Lawrence fell the brunt of the fight, and he protected me. "You don't know how I stand

between you and the world,” he said, later on. If I supported him with all my might, the wings of his sure spirit made a shelter for me always. (*Not I* 40-41)

After his death, his sister Ada Clark said, “the way she stuck to him was wonderful. He would drag her off on one of his sudden journeys without hardly giving her time to pack, perhaps when they had only just settled somewhere and got fairly comfortable, but on she would go” (qtd. in Crotch 12). Frieda explained, “As Lawrence and I were adventurers by nature, we explored” (*Not I* vii). They sought rural environments, and from reading James Fenimore Cooper’s romantic novels of the American Indian, especially *The Last of the Mohicans*, longed for “Beautiful wild America!” as Frieda recalled (*Frieda Lawrence* 122).

From Taormina, Sicily, Lawrence declared on October 8, 1921, “I wish I could find a ship that would carry me round the world and land me somewhere in the West--New Mexico or California--and I could have a little house and two goats, somewhere away by myself in the Rocky Mountains. I may manage that” (*Letters IV* 93). A few weeks later, he received a letter from Mabel Dodge Sterne (later Luhan), a wealthy American art patroness, inviting him to Taos (*Letters IV* 110-111) where she felt she had found a more authentic life through the Indians of Taos Pueblo, particularly the lover (later husband) she found there, Tony Lujan.

Mabel had known writer Gertrude Stein and her brother, Leo Stein, the modern art collector and critic, when she lived in Florence (1905-1912) and had been at the center of the Modernist art and social movements when she lived in New York (1912-1917). Leo had stayed with the Sternes in Taos in 1918 (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 11-12).

In 1919, Lawrence had met Leo near Florence and seen his photographs of Taos. The summer of 1921 Lawrence heard of Mabel's husband, Maurice Sterne, who lived for long periods in Anticoli Corrado, a small artists' village near Rome (*Letters IV* 5, 111). It was likely through *The Dial*, the New York-based modernist literary magazine where Mabel read an excerpt from Lawrence's travel book *Sea and Sardinia* (Bachrach 9), that she contacted him. She thought only he could capture Taos and the Indians (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 3-4). Lawrence, like other moderns, sought direction by looking to native cultures: "one must somehow bring together the two ends of humanity, our own thin end, and the last dark strand from the previous pre-white era," he replied to Mabel (*Letters IV* 110-111).

After going to Ceylon and Australia, the Lawrences arrived in Taos on September 11, 1922, Lawrence's thirty-seventh birthday. "I think New Mexico was the greatest experience from the outside world that I have ever had. It certainly changed me forever," Lawrence wrote later. "[T]he moment I saw the brilliant, proud morning shine high up over the deserts of Santa Fé, something stood still in my soul, and I started to attend. . . . In the magnificent fierce morning of New Mexico one sprang awake, a new part of the soul woke up suddenly, and the old world gave way to a new" ("New Mexico" 142).

But by September 27 Lawrence complained, "Mabel Sterne is very nice to us-- though I hate living on somebody else's property and accepting their kindnesses. . . . Everything in America goes by *will*" (*Letters IV* 310). When Lawrence told Mabel they wanted to go away, she offered him use of her son's mountain hunting ranch. On October 25 Lawrence described it as "very nice, about 16 miles from here. We might

possibly fix up that, and live there. . . . I work all morning.--But we don't get much time to ourselves.--Wish really we could go to that ranch, more alone. But it is rather inaccessible" (*Letters IV* 329).

The forested 160 acres, located on Lobo Mountain ("lobo" is Spanish for "wolf") above the tiny village of San Cristobal, is on the traditional route used by Kiowa Native Americans (Miller) and still used by Taos Pueblo Native Americans (Haller). The Kiowa, nomadic buffalo hunters living in the Texas panhandle and as far northeast as New Mexico, traded buffalo for corn from Taos Pueblo. Based on their languages and stories, it is likely the Kiowa and Pueblo people are related (Moore), descending from the Anasazi civilization (Redish and Lewis) and having Aztec roots ("Kiowa-Tanoan languages").

Under the Homestead Act of 1862 the property was homesteaded in 1883 by John and Louise Craig who, Lawrence wrote, were looking for gold (*Letters V* 110). Around 1891 John built a small three-room cabin (Bachrach 48). In 1893 the Craigs sold the property to William and Mary McClure who raised five hundred white Angora goats (Bachrach 44-45; *Letters V* 110-111).

For \$1,200, according to Lawrence, Mabel bought the ranch in May 1920 (Bachrach 45; *Letters V* 105, 111). It is likely Tony encouraged her to purchase it as he had encouraged her to purchase her home next to Taos Pueblo land (Luhan, *Edge* 230). During Lawrence's visit, she persuaded John to trade it back for a buffalo-hide coat and a small some of money (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 192; *Letters IV* 329 n. 1).

On October 31 the Lawrences spent a day there: "It was so lovely: and really free, far more so than here," he wrote. "Frieda wants us to go and live there. We'll try it

first for a week, because it will be colder. But I think we shall do it--and try to make a *real* life there. It is much more splendid, more *real*, there, than here” and “There are two rather poor little houses--most of the lot is timber--all rather abandoned. . . . If we like it in the long run, MS. [Mabel Sterne] says she will let us have it. It’s a wonderful place, with the world at your feet and the mountains at your back, and pine-trees” (*Letters IV* 333-334).

They invited two new friends, the Danish painters Kai Götzsche and Knud Merrild who had a four-seater Model T Ford, to join them there for a few days. The Lawrences didn’t own a car and didn’t drive. After pushing the car part way up the steep, unpaved hill, they arrived. However, the cabins were “desolate, dismal and dirty, in a state of decay,” Merrild noted.

They had been abandoned by man for a long time and inhabited only by rats, squirrels, chipmunks and bats. Despite the missing glass in the windows, the air was foul with the odours of excrement and dead animals, left to rot. The larger house, two rooms and a kitchen, was absolutely uninhabitable as it was, and needed repair in the worst way. We therefore started to clean the smaller house, to get it in shape for the night. It had one room only, stacked with clumsy old furniture and a very small kitchen with a stove. (Merrild 55)

But the place attracted them, and they found the nature fascinating. Lawrence named it “Lobo Ranch” (Merrild 55). That night the Lawrences laid down a mattress on the floor of the living room. The Danes slept on the kitchen floor. A blanket in the doorway separated them (Merrild 63).

Offended by the Danes accompanying Lawrence, Mabel notified him that she would only rent him one cabin (Merrild 64). Fortunately, while exploring the mountain, they met the nearest neighbors, the Hawk family, two miles south on the thousand-acre Del Monte Ranch. The Hawks, who knew Mabel (*Edge* 238), offered to rent two cabins for the winter (Merrild 66). The four stayed from December 1 until March 19, 1923, when the Lawrences left for Mexico, eventually traveling separately to England and Europe.

On March 22, 1924, the Lawrences returned to Mabel's with the Honorable Dorothy Brett, a partially-deaf painter trained at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, daughter of Viscount Esher and part of the Bloomsbury circle, the only friend who joined Lawrence's long-dreamed-of New World utopian community. As a child, Brett annually saw Buffalo Bill's Wild West at the Crystal Palace in London and was drawn to the American Indians (Manchester 6).

"It wasn't long before they began to talk of going up to the ranch to stay," Mabel recalled (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 191). Because Lawrence did not want property (Frieda Lawrence, *Frieda Lawrence* 335), Mabel sold the ranch to Frieda on March 29 (Talbot). Shortly after, Frieda gave Mabel the manuscript of *Sons and Lovers*. Mabel was offended by the spirit of the exchange and traded the manuscript away (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 192).

On May 5 the Lawrences and Brett moved to the ranch, assisting with repairs and improvements to the property including the three-room cabin for the Lawrences, a two-room one for Mabel's visits, and a one-roomer for Brett. Mabel confessed to Tony "I'd given away the ranch and really had no more right to pasture our horses there or let the Indians go up and stay when they were hunting" (Luhan, *Lorenzo* 203).

For five weeks several Indians camped above the cabins and helped rebuild them--propping up a wall, reshingling roofs, making adobe bricks, and rebuilding a chimney. "In the evenings we would all go up and sit on fallen trees, the Indians sitting in a row on a log, gently beating the drum and singing their lovely, strange songs," Brett remembered. "How beautiful it was with the moon, stars, and slight wind stirring the trees. The voices of the Indians--now a tenor, now a deep rumbling bass--soared out on the quiet night. Time stood still; Lawrence sat wrapped in thought" (Brett, "Autobiography" 17).

Frieda cooked huge meals for everyone as she recorded in her memoir.

We all worked so hard. Brett, as everyone called her, straight from her studio life, was amazing for the hard work she would do. One day we cleaned our spring and carried huge stones until we nearly dropped. The spring is in a hollow, and I loved watching the horses play when they came to drink there, shoving each other's noses away from the water level and then tearing up the bank. We did it all ourselves for very little money for we didn't have much. We got a cow and had four horses: Azul, Aaron, and two others; and then we got chickens, all white ones, Leghorns. The beautiful cockerel was called Moses and Susan was the cow's name.

Lawrence got up at five o'clock each morning. With the opera glasses my mother had given him, he looked for Susan, who was an independent creature and loved to hide in the woods. There he would stand, when at last he had found her, and shake his forefinger at her--to my delight--and scold her, the black cow.

I made our own butter in a little glass churn and the chickens flourished on the buttermilk, and so did we in this healthy life. We made our own bread in the [beehive-shaped adobe] Indian oven outside, black bread and white and cakes, and Lawrence was terribly fussy about the bread, which had to be perfect. He made cupboards and chairs and painted doors and windows. He wrote and irrigated and it seems amazing that one single man got so much done. We rode and people stayed with us, and he was always there for everybody as if he did nothing at all. He helped Brett with her pictures [paintings] and me with my poor attempts.

It was a wonderful summer; there were wild strawberries, that year, and back in the canyon raspberries as big as garden ones, but I was afraid to get them because I had heard that bears love raspberries. Bears won't do you any harm except when they have young. There were bears in the canyon--that seemed indeed the end of the world! The Brett had a tiny shanty in which she lived. She adored Lawrence and slaved for him.
(*Not* / 145-146)

The Hawks helped them manage the horses and cow and drove them to town for supplies, or Brett would be driven down in a wagon (Brett, "Autobiography" 19, 68). Mabel and Tony also made frequent visits with supplies. In August, Lawrence began calling the ranch "Kiowa" because "the Kiowa Indians used to camp on the hill on which the ranch stands" (*Letters* V 94, 228). He recorded the history of the ranch (which he likely learned from Mabel and Tony) in letters (*Letters* V 105, 110-112) and in *St. Mawr* which he finished at this time (Bachrach 109).

The Lawrences and Brett left for Mexico in early October. In January, Brett was sent away and came back to the Hawks; in February Lawrence nearly died from typhoid and malaria compounded by his tuberculosis. After Frieda got him through customs, they returned to Kiowa Ranch in April. Frieda asked Brett to not be on their property; she stayed in a cabin on the Hawks' land (Brett, "Autobiography" 22-23).

"Slowly at the ranch he got better. The high clear air, short sunbaths, our watching and care, and the spring brought life back into him," Frieda observed (*Not I* 151).

How thrilling it was to feel the inrush of new vitality in him; it was like a living miracle. A wonder before one's eyes. How grateful he was inside him! "I can do things again. I can live and do as I like, no longer held down by the devouring illness." How he loved every minute of life at the ranch. The morning, the squirrels, every flower that came in its turn, the big trees, chopping the wood, the chickens, making bread, all our hard work, and the people and all assumed the radiance of new life.

He worked hard as a relaxation and wrote for hard work. (*Not I* 152-153)

On September 11, Lawrence's fortieth birthday and the third anniversary of his arrival in Taos, Bill Hawk drove the Lawrences down from the ranch for what was to be Lawrence's last time (Bachrach 77). He and Frieda returned to London then lived primarily in Italy. "In his last years he wanted to go back to New Mexico," his friend Aldous Huxley said. "He had been very happy there on the ranch in Taos. But he wasn't strong enough to make the trip" (Interview). He also probably could not have gotten

through U. S. customs because of his tuberculosis. Brett made Taos her home and oversaw the ranch in the Lawrences' absence.

Summer 1929 Georgia O'Keeffe stayed with Mabel whom, along with Brett, O'Keeffe knew from the previous winter in New York. O'Keeffe spent several weeks at the ranch which she, and everyone, called "Brett's place." With two guides from the pueblo (Greenough 495) on July 27 O'Keeffe and three young people made the seventeen mile trip by horseback to the ranch as one of the young men recorded.

Our narrow path followed the course of a swift stream. We occasionally found deserted bear traps and here as elsewhere came across cattle, horses and sheep turned loose. We camped at night on a friend's ranch, where the girls [his sister and O'Keeffe] slept inside. But the inside was very public as the girls were awakened every night by wild animals. Chipmunks entered the kitchen (kitchen and bedroom are virtually one) and knocked down pans, etc. One night a coyote entered the kitchen, or at least howled just outside the girls' window, terrifying them. Night before last an enormous porcupine entered their bedroom and had to be ejected by force. (qtd. in DeWitt 12)

O'Keeffe, who had read much of Lawrence's work and corresponded briefly with him but never met him, returned to paint his favorite pine tree. Now entitled "The Lawrence Tree," she called it "Pine Tree with Stars at Brett's, N. M." (Robinson 593 n. 778).

On March 2, 1930, Lawrence died in Vence, France, and was buried at the cemetery there. Frieda returned to the ranch she loved in June 1931. Her married Italian

lover, Captain Angelo Ravagli, was dismayed by its isolation and primitiveness.

One late autumn evening [we] were sitting by the big adobe fireplace with the burning logs in the little three-room cabin, two candles lit on the crude mantelpiece. There was no running water, no electric light in the cabin, the low ceiling of corrugated iron. Outside the silence of the pine trees and the loneliness of the stars. [I] liked it; the minimum of comfort seemed comfort to [me]. Having a bath in a tub in front of the fireplace or out in the irrigation ditch in the sun seemed more luxurious than the grandest bathroom. [I] liked the utter loneliness, the silence, the space; it gave [me] room to be [myself]. (*Frieda Lawrence* 25)

“Frieda was very special,” O’Keeffe, who met her at this time, said. “I can remember very clearly the first time I ever saw her, standing in a doorway, with her hair all frizzed out, wearing a cheap red calico dress that looked as though she’d just wiped out the frying pan with it. She was not thin, and not young, but there was something radiant and wonderful about her” (qtd. in Tomkins 54).

At the end of Ravagli’s six-month visa, they left for Europe where they remained while Frieda settled Lawrence’s estate and Ravagli got free of the army. May 1933 Frieda sat in one cabin continuing her memoir of Lawrence (*Not I v*) while Ravagli demolished the two-room guest cabin and began a new house with a bathroom and running water--and no packrats or chipmunks. He recorded this in his diary:

Under the first stone on the south corner we put a glass bottle with a list of the names of Mrs. Frieda Lawrence, Captain Angelo Ravagli, and one of the workmen, with this note: “This house is wanted by Frieda

Lawrence, and Captain Angelo Ravagli in its simple style and modest appearance to represent unity of intent and construction, that comes from the finest sentiment of friendship.” (The note was written in Italian.) In the bottle we added Mrs. Frieda Lawrence’s and Captain Ravagli’s photographs . . . some coins in American, French and German money, plus a piece of coral and two molars of Ravagli’s teeth.” (Frieda Lawrence, *Frieda Lawrence* 22-23)

A friend from Taos remembered a party at Frieda’s new house:

Several of the prominent ladies of Taos were there, but Georgia [O’Keeffe] was the guest of honor. She sat alone atop a ‘Taos bed’ (a large divan covered with rugs and colorful pillows) in black clothes, her feet tucked under her, her manner that of a gracious empress. All the rest of the women, including Frieda, looked like happy robins, chatting, hopping about in gay clothes, while Georgia sat very still and talked sparingly in a muted voice. (Fechin 33)

The summer of 1934, a French woman journalist visited Lawrence’s grave in Vence and reported the cemetery in a decrepit state. An international scandal erupted (Crotch 29). Frieda arranged for Lawrence’s remains to be interred at the ranch. “In the autumn [Angelo] had built a small chapel, very simple, on the hill under the steep mountains. The hill had wild flowers growing on it, sunflowers and red and pink cactus and michaelmas daisies and little cypress trees. [Lawrence] had loved the spot.” (*Frieda Lawrence* 132). In March, Ravagli went to Vence and had Lawrence’s body exhumed then taken to Marseille where it was cremated. He had difficulty getting a visa to return

to New York with the ashes but finally left by boat from Villefranche (Crotch 32-37).

Frieda heard that Brett and Mabel wanted to scatter Lawrence's ashes, so she and Ravagli mixed them into the cement of the altar. A small statue of a phoenix, Lawrence's symbol of death and rebirth, was placed on the roof and another above the altar embellished with painted leaves and the initials "DHL." Brett designed the interior (Sagar 107) and painted one of the windows (Brett, *Lawrence* viii).

Frieda's youngest daughter, Barby, who as a young adult often stayed with her mother and Lawrence and was present at the time of Lawrence's death, was at the ranch with her husband during the ceremony held at sundown September 15, four days after what would have been Lawrence's fiftieth birthday and thirteen years after his arrival in Taos.

Frieda invited some of the Taos Americans, and asked the Indians from the Pueblo to come and do their ritual dance.

A local judge she knew was to give the oration. Unfortunately some Taos busybody "tampered" with him. The judge failed to appear, so my husband took his place.

When the casket of ashes had been put in the chapel, the sun set and the skies grew dark. A big fire was lighted on the level below, and the Indians, in feather dress, did their ceremonial dance. Trinidad, a young Indian whom Lawrence had known, led the dancers.

Afterwards a storm broke out. The horses neighed in fright.

Lightning and thunder circled the ranch and the mountain. (Barr 36)

The eulogy read in part "What a troublous life he had--a life of conflict. That was

inevitable in a man whose whole being revolted against stagnation, hypocrisy, and the deadening limitations of the culture of his time” (qtd. in Bachrach 103). A former Shakespearean actress who lived near Taos recited several of Lawrence’s poems (Byrne 367). “Dorothy [Brett] came, but she hid behind a tree. After the ceremony, there was a fiesta, with everyone eating hotdogs” another guest recalled (Fechin 36).

After Frieda’s death, Ravagli told two guests in Taos that he had dumped Lawrence’s ashes between Marseille and Villefranche (Delavenay).

In 1937 Aldous and Maria Huxley summered at the ranch. Inspired by Lawrence’s descriptions of the landscape and the Indians, Huxley had set *Brave New World’s* “Savage Reservation” in New Mexico without having been there. “The country is most astonishing and beautiful” he wrote during his visit, “but I don’t know if one [could] stand it very long. I’ve never been in any place, except parts of Mexico, which gave such an impression of being alien, even hostile, to man. Humans crawl about in this savage, empty vastness like irrelevant ticks--just not counting” (*Letters* 422).

Fastidious Maria felt Frieda’s life was “extraordinary” and “primitive”:

The easiness might be called messiness, the milk which comes . . . from a pretty jersey cow is around in all forms of creams, and butters, and sour creams, and milks and what not. . . there are also the pig-bowl and the cat-bowl and the dog-bowl; many things to horrify me and shock me; yet she is essentially clean if you can imagine that; perhaps because she is a blonde. . . . Meanwhile there she sits, talking of Montaigne or Buddha or Mabel Dodge and making us all feel happy and at home. . . .

Frieda is continually visited out of the blue by vague friends or

strangers; they want to see Mrs. D. H. Lawrence, and though she complains she lets them. Then they bring her cakes . . and think they have paid her for her trouble. (qtd. in Bedford 346-347)

The summer of 1939 the poet W. H. Auden and his young lover spent time there on their cross-country “honeymoon.” So did actress Lillian Gish (Lefranc 50). In the fall playwright Tennessee Williams came to write a play about Lawrence, but after three days in the Lawrence’s old cabin he fled, saying Lawrence’s ghost was too overpowering (Lucas 278). In 1949 Frieda wrote, “a Leonard Bernstein came, a musician.” Bernstein, thirty, was on a cross-country drive with his younger brother and poet Stephen Spender (qtd. in Byrne 386).

In 1955 the University of New Mexico accepted the ranch as a gift from Frieda for “educational, cultural, charitable, and recreational purposes” (Ferris and Hyde). Frieda died at her winter home, a 300-acre ranch, Los Pinos, just north of Taos in El Prado, on August 11, 1956, her seventy-seventh birthday. Ravagli and other friends attended her.

“She was buried high on that hill [just below the Lawrence chapel],” Barby said. “She had asked for a small, plain, wooden cross, but Angelo was afraid people would think he was being mean [cheap], so he had a tombstone made” (qtd. in Jackson 96). On the stone, behind glass, is a photo of Frieda in her mature years.

When Huxley learned about her death he wrote this response.

How strange their careers were! The coalminer’s son escaping, via Frieda, into the larger world, beyond his social conditioning. And the Richthofen, who had somehow blundered into marriage with possibly the dullest Professor in the Western hemisphere, escaping, via Lawrence into that

same world and into an old age in that New Mexico desert which was, in some sort, a projection of her own deep nature. How improbable! But that is the charm and the horror of human history: the impossible actually happens--all in time. (*Letters* 813)

Three years after Frieda's death Ravagli returned to his family in Italy. His children and Frieda's eventually inherited the Lawrence estate (Byrne 415-416). In 2004 the National Register of Historic Places entered the ranch into the registry. It is also on the New Mexico Register of Cultural Properties. Renamed "The D. H. Lawrence Ranch," efforts continue to fund the restoration and improvement of the property.

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