



News Release

State of New Mexico
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Chope's Restaurant is Historic ***State Also Recognizes Oliver Lee's Ranch and a Galisteo Meeting Hall***

Santa Fe — Chope's Town Café and Bar, a southern New Mexico dining tradition known for its home-like atmosphere, grit and spicy dishes, has been listed in the State Register of Cultural Properties, the New Mexico Historic Preservation Division announced today.

Named for José "Chope" Benavides, the son of original proprietors Longina and Margarito Benavides, the restaurant is a family-run business established in 1915 when Longina opened her dining room to sell enchiladas to local residents. Son José, who took over the restaurant in the 1940s, was nicknamed Chope by his father because he constantly wore *chopos*, or overalls, and his mother named the restaurant after him.

For much of the twentieth century Chope's was the social and political gathering place of La Mesa and its surrounds some 20 miles south of Las Cruces. It has earned a regional reputation for its traditional New Mexican food. The restaurant played a pivotal role in the 1942 Bracero Program which permitted Mexican nationals to live and work in the U.S., generally in agricultural jobs.

"This is a multi-generational family business that has contributed to the preservation of Hispanic foodways," said Dr. Rick Hendricks, New Mexico State Historian and chairman of the Cultural Properties Review Committee, which listed Chope's in the State Register and recommended it for the National Register of Historic Places.

The Benavides relied on Braceros for local produce and many of them ate at Chope's, sometimes bartering produce in exchange for a meal. The program was an essential part of the nation's agricultural economy from 1942–1964, greatly affecting farming, businesses and culture in rural communities.

Chope's is notable for its thick adobe walls, heavy vigas, latillas and a pressed tin ceiling. But the restaurant with its several additions, the bar, a bartender's residence and two structures are significant more for the role they played in developing the social and political fabric of Las Mesa and its surrounds than for their architecture.

"It's exceptional for a stand-alone restaurant to have survived 50 years, much less 100," said Steven Moffson, HPD State and National Register coordinator. "And, very few restaurants in New Mexico have retained their historic interiors the way Chope's has."

Chope Benavides took over the business from his parents and purchased a rectangular adobe welding shop next door in 1942 that he opened as a bar in 1949, creating separate businesses on the same property. Although his mother bought liquor in Juarez during Prohibition to sell at Chope's, her son wanted the bar located outside the restaurant and away from the living quarters under the same roof where he and his wife, Guadalupe, were raising four daughters. Three of the daughters continue to cook meals at Chope's today.

Their father, who was born in 1915 and died in 1990, has remained a beloved community and political figure. Although he never held office, Benavides consulted with New Mexico governors of both parties for decades. He held weekly coffee gatherings at the café through the 1980s for local farmers who discussed crops and current events affecting agriculture.

"Walking into Chope's is like walking into someone's house who you really like and the food smells great," said Dr. Beth O'Leary, a former Cultural Properties Review Committee member and retired New Mexico State University professor. She worked with students Norma Hartell and Addison Warner who spent more than a year researching and writing the nomination. They attended the CPRC meeting with Cecilia Yañez, one of Chope Benavides' three surviving daughters.

San José Hall

The ongoing restoration of San José Hall, a ca. 1905 fraternal meeting and dance hall in Galisteo, were advanced when the CPRC listed the Territorial-style adobe in the State Register last month.

Currently used for weekend art shows, the building is a prominent local landmark built by La Sociedad de San José, one of many religious societies founded in the nineteenth century whose role was to support the parish church and priest, and perform missionary and educational work.

It is significant for its earthen architecture and as the site of numerous community events. The interior has a small stage at one end and bancos line two walls, framing an open wooden floor. Community dances, religious meeting, performances, family celebrations, and feast days were held in the hall until the 1950s and 1960s when activities diminished.

The building is known historically as La Sala de San José. The organization, La Sala de San José de Galisteo owns the building. Partnering organization Galisteo de Sala raised \$90,000 and organized volunteer labor to begin restoring it in 2000.

Several community members attended the meeting in support of the Register nomination written by FirstLight Consulting based in Santa Fe. The CPRC listed it in the State Register and recommended for the National Register.

Oliver Lee Dog Canyon Ranch

Oliver Milton Lee was a rancher, politician and gunfighter, and was central—partly because of water rights he owned—to the founding of Alamogordo and Otero County. He established the Oliver Lee Dog Canyon Ranch in 1893, building a four-room adobe ranch house that was added on to four times and grew to 10 rooms by 1907.

The current home is an expert reconstruction; it is considered historic and many of the adobes used to rebuild it are original. Visitors can tour the ranch house on weekends from 3 p.m. – 4 p.m. at Oliver Lee Memorial State Park without an appointment. The original home slowly fell to ruin after Lee's death in 1941, although the house and outbuildings were used in the production of the 1971 Disney film, *Scandalous John*, filmed on location and at White Sands Missile Range, in Arizona and South Dakota. There are 10 buildings, structures and sites original to the property that create the new historic district at the state park.

In 1983 the New Mexico Parks Division acquired the property from the National Park Service, which had controlled it since 1940, and began rebuilding the house. Because of its long public stewardship, the property possesses a high degree of historic integrity, contains prehistoric and historic archaeological sites and is seen a microcosm of ranch in life in southern New Mexico's Tularosa Basin at the turn of the twentieth century. It is important for its association with Lee, who was a state representative and state senator from 1918–1928.

Lee gained notoriety and mounting legal problems in 1896 after being named one of the accused in the murder of Albert Fountain and his nine-year-old son, Henry. The father and son disappeared upon returning to Otero County and after Fountain successfully secured grand jury indictments against Lee and a close associate on cattle rustling charges.

Lee eventually stood trial for the Fountains' murders. Although their bodies were never found, authorities located Fountain's empty buckboard at what now is White Sands Missile Range. Blood and tracks were found at the site and several horse trails from the crime scene allegedly led to Lee's ranch.

A grand jury refused to indict Lee, but two years later Sheriff Pat Garrett secured an arrest warrant for him in Las Cruces after repeated attempts. His long-time friend Senator Albert Fall, an attorney who owed Lee his election to the legislature, represented him. In 1899, a jury deliberated only seven minutes before finding Lee not guilty.

Two state park employees, archaeologist Robert Stokes and field bureau support chief Christy Tafoya wrote the nomination. It was listed in the State Register and recommended for the National Register.

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