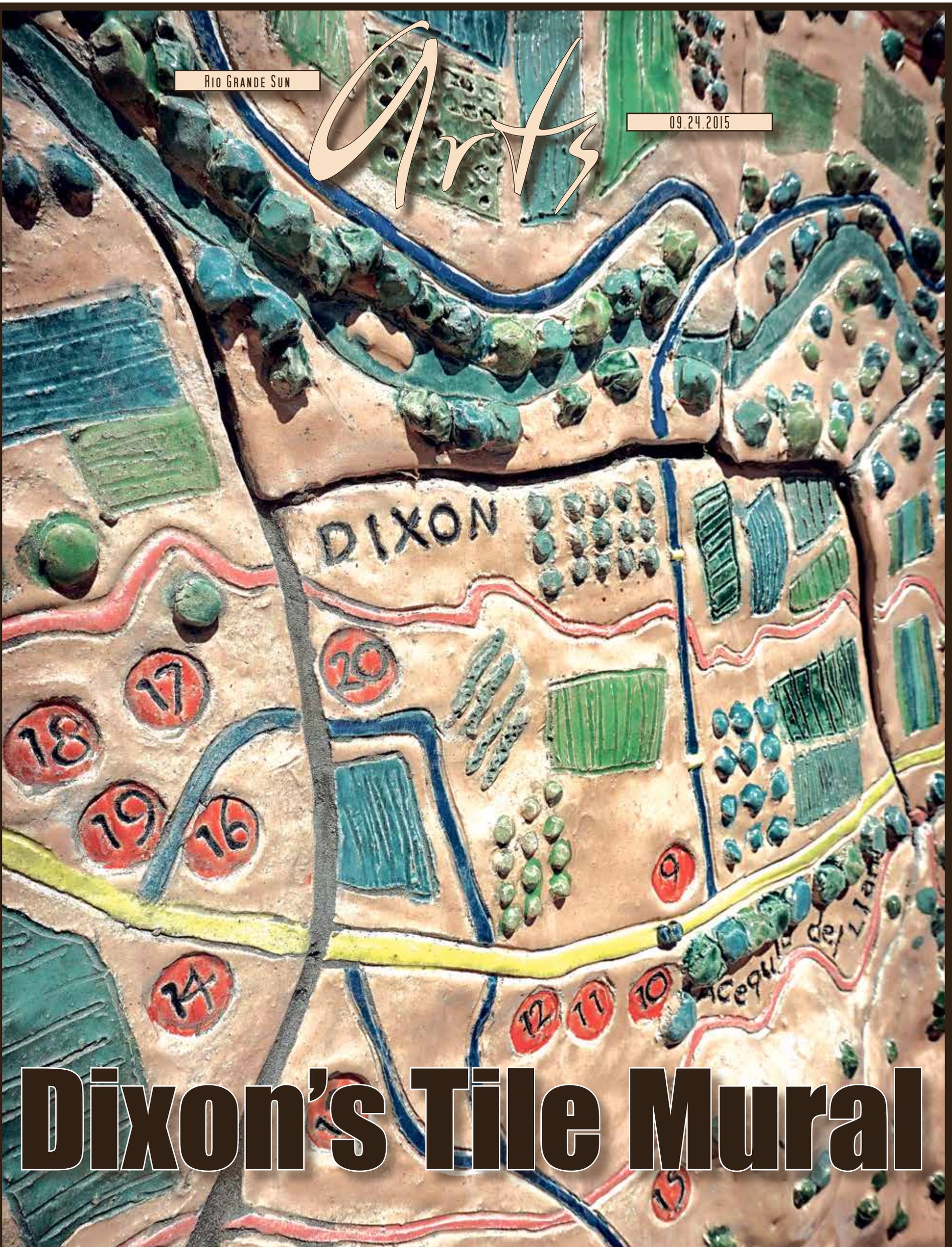


RIO GRANDE SUN

Arts

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# Dixon's Tile Mural

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Deija Fernandez (foreground) attaches one of the final pieces to the Dixon tile mural before grouting. Mark Conzales works alongside while Shel Neymark (left) surveys progress.

## Telling A Village History With Public Art

It's not often you can go to your local co-op to do some shopping and end up learning a lot about history, but for those who live in Dixon, or for that matter those who are just visiting, the east wall of the co-op features an almost completed tile mural that depicts the history of Dixon and a lot of the Embudo Valley.

Created by artist Shel Neymark and four teens: Mark Gonzales, Deija Fernandez, John Salazar and Brooklyn Seebeck-Sullivan, the multi-faceted tile mural is an eloquent and unique testament to the vast history that lives in the area.

Two teens were recommended by teachers they had had at Dixon Elementary, one was recommended by the librarian and one Neymark knew from St. Anthony's Church.

"I had this idea about doing a mural here," Neymark says as he points to the tile mural on the side of the co-op bldg. "Estevan Arellano (author of *Enduring Acequias*) was really interested in ancient place names. After I told him about my concept of using a map that would show where all the acequias are, we both got interested in adding some place names and then we started thinking about historical and important sites and the project got

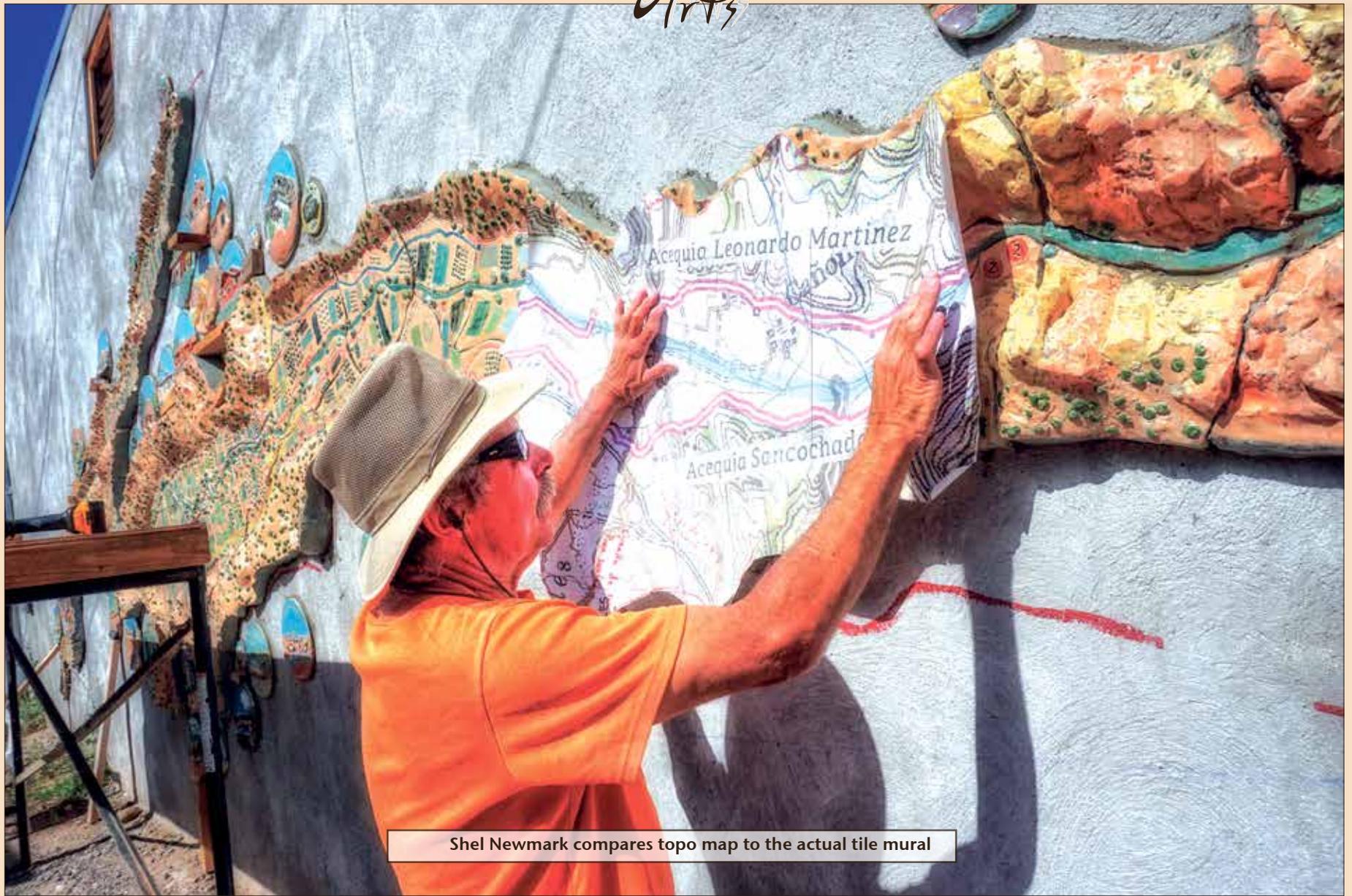
bigger and bigger as Estevan and I had discussions about it."

Neymark says as he looked at the side of the co-op building, he decided it was a perfect place for a large-scale mural, and the idea of portraying the history of the area appealed to him greatly.

"I'm the president of the library board and the library owns this building. There were lots of discussions about it. I proposed it to the board — I didn't make the decision (unilaterally) — and everyone said, 'Yeah, that sounds good, let's do it.'"

Neymark says he's familiar with topographical maps and the idea of using one as a starting point — an aerial view of the valley — seemed apropos.

"Peter Arnold from Arid Lands printed out a huge topo map of the area for us," Neymark explains. "We then drew the borders of the valley and drew out shapes of tiles that would fit my kiln shelf, which is about 24 inches octagonal. We then rolled out slabs of clay and laid the map on the clay and traced where these hills and valleys are onto the clay."

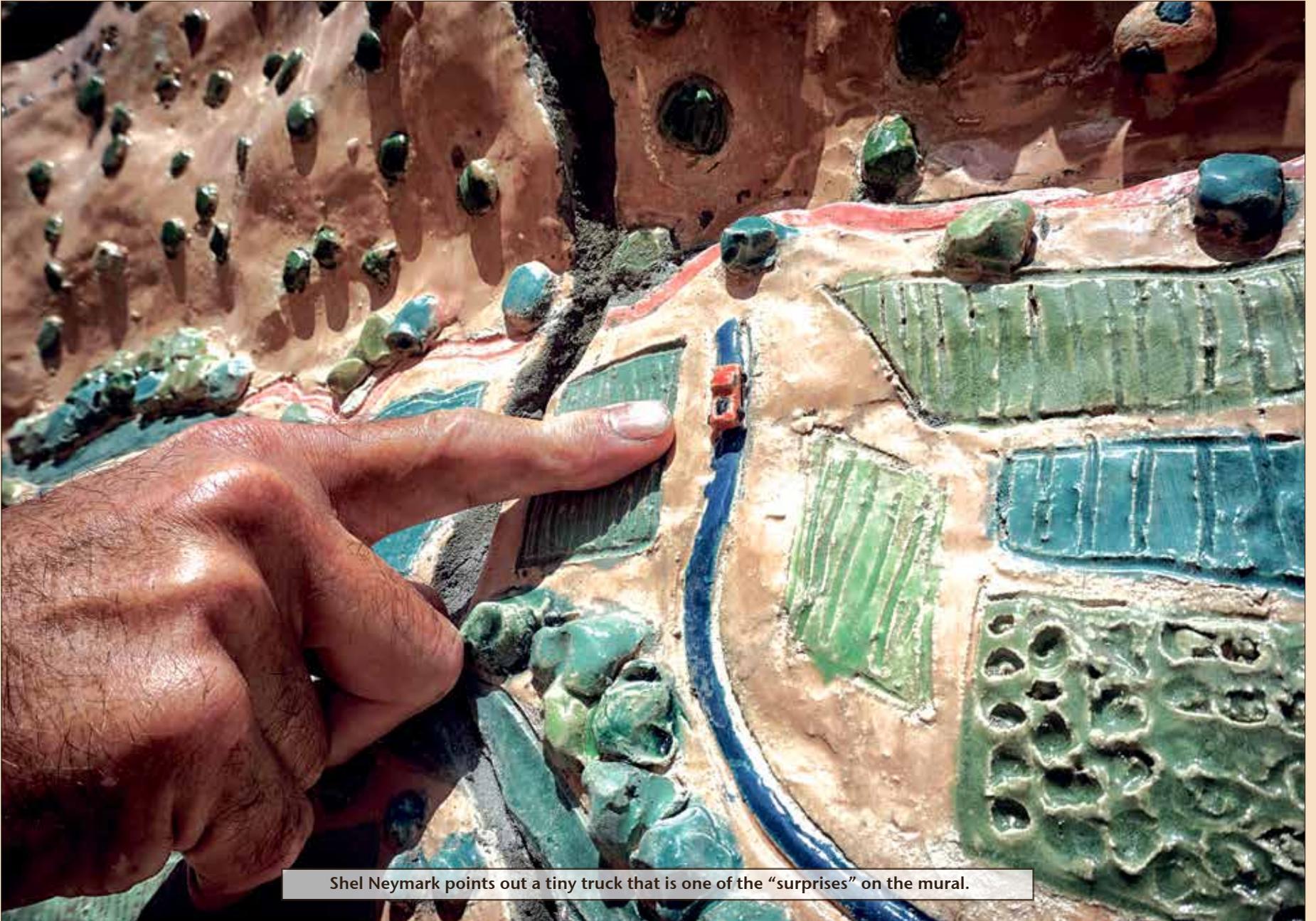


Shel Newmark compares topo map to the actual tile mural



Shel Neymark (left), Mark Gonzales and Deija Fernandez put final touches on the Dixon tile mural

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Shel Neymark points out a tiny truck that is one of the "surprises" on the mural.

When Neymark says "we," he is referring to the four teens who were instrumental in the project, which has now taken a little over a year and is waiting for a final coat of plaster.

"We got six or seven different small grants," Neymark says when asked how the project was funded. "The first people we applied to were the Sheila Fortune Foundation in Boulder, Colo., who fund projects with kids in Colorado and New Mexico. They did some funding for Roger Montoya. They gave us the first — I call it the seed money — a year ago June. The seed money was the first and it got us started looking for more."

The original budget was \$18,000 but it ended up growing to \$22,000 or \$23,000, Neymark said. The Sheila Fortune Foundation gave them \$3,000 and then

they started looking elsewhere for the remaining funding.

"McCune Foundation gave us some funding," Neymark says as he lists other sources of money for the project. "Partners for Fish and Wildlife supplied some funding. The Northern New Mexico Heritage Foundation gave us some. The For Our Future Fund of the Santa Fe Foundation supplied some funds. There were a bunch."

He admits that his initial estimate was low because he miscalculated just how much time the project was going to take. As it got more complicated and added more information to the mural planning, the time involved increased.

"We've been working a year on it," Neymark said as he watched Gonzales and

Fernandez attach some of the final plaques to the wall in anticipation of grouting and the final plastering. "We started last August. We worked at the school Tuesdays and Thursdays in the mornings. From August until December we made all the plaques. The five of us would go and draw the buildings and photograph them and then come back here to the community center to make the plaques. Then we got the map in January and started making the map pieces and then when summer hit, we started working four days a week doing the map pieces in my studio.

"We finished that in July and we started putting it up last Tuesday. We've spent three and a half days so far. It's gone really fast. I thought this would take two weeks to put up, so this is the only thing that has been quicker than I thought it would be." Fernandez, who was applying some

adhesive to the back of a plaque was asked what was the most enjoyable part of the project for her.

"Learning about what happened in our community and seeing all the different things, like the battle site," she said and then added, "And learning how to make tiles. I had done some ceramic work in elementary school, but nothing like these big tiles."

Fernandez points to one tile and explains that all the tiles were cooperatively made by all the artists.

And then she talked about the hardest part.

"Tracing the map onto the clay because it was hard to see the lines," she admitted. "Which one was the road, which one was the railroad. Forming it was also hard



A small, personalized flying saucer adds a surprise for visitors of the tile mural in Dixon



Some of the plaques featuring historically significant locations in the Embudo Valley and Dixon

# Dixon Tile Mural

because you had to make it like it was on the map.”

Like the contours and what they meant in terms of highs and lows in the terrain).

Gonzales said one of the most enjoyable portions of the project for him was “The hikes we went on to visit the various historical places. We went to them and sketched them in our sketch books and also photographed them and then we came back to the workshop...”

And the most difficult aspect according to the Gonzales?

“To get everything to look like it was supposed to and to get the pieces to line up. It all went pretty smoothly except for a couple of pieces. This piece here, it was really top heavy so when we put it up we had to use a couple of boards and duct tape it to support it while it adhered to the wall.”

Neymark chimes in at this moment with evident pride in his voice, “We didn’t break one piece.”

Which was important because they made the pieces by hand and made them in order. If one had broken it would have been difficult to match it to the other pieces.

He describes how they made the individual pieces.

“I could fire about five pieces at a time in my kiln. We started on that end where the Embudo Station is. We were working both in my studio and in the community center here in Dixon. We actually started from the other direction in the community center — starting with Apodaca and the Box Canyon.”

Asked what part of the project he enjoyed most, Neymark paused and then answered, “Gosh, it’s hard to say. I love the Embudo Box part. I love where it gets really complicated in here where all the acequias come together. What was really great was realizing how rich the life is here. It goes from the Pueblo on the mesa there in the 1300s to the Camino Real to the site where the Pueblos gathered during the Pueblo Revolt. That’s the battle of Embudo site. The location where the Chicano activists were printing up stuff in the ‘70s. That’s the exciting part for me, all the history. There’s just so much here.”

Neymark also said they had some fun and added some individualized “surprises” to the mural.

“We had some fun with it, too,” Neymark said as he walked over to the wall and pointed to several places. “We have a lot of little surprises in it like this one. Deija’s nickname is ‘Speed bump’ so here is a speed bump with a speed bump sign. Brooklyn did this little space ship. Mark did Sasquatch. John did these wonderful little cars and a little truck. I did the Grim Reaper sitting here. There are more surprises hidden around.”

Another final aspect they were working on that day was the legend, just like one you would find on a map explaining what various numbers a viewer would find on the mural meant.

“Every plaque has a number that goes with it,” Neymark says as he points to an example. “And for every *acequia* we have a “presa” and a “desague.” (numbers 2 and 3 respectively). There are 14 *acequias* and they are this coral, so everywhere an *acequia* ends, there is what is called a *desague*, which is where the water flows back into the river. Everywhere the *acequia* starts, and that’s a *presa*, where the water from the river enters the *acequia*.”

A fellow who had just done some shopping at the co-op stops by and tells them it is turning out so much better than he had ever thought it would and it contains so much information.

“It’s going to be a thing that people come to see. People will come to see just this.”

Another visitor stops and offers similar praise and encouragement with, “This is goose bump material, keep it up!”

After the second visitor leaves, Neymark talks a bit about the reception the tile mural has gotten.

“People here are interested in local history,” Neymark says. “Library talks this summer on the archeology of the area, the Dixon Case that went to the state supreme court, Father Koppers who was a priest

here for about 40 years, a geology of the area talk and others were all well attended, sometimes with over 100 people.

“For the kids growing up here to know the history will hopefully give them a sense of the richness of this place and a sense of their place in time. It will also help kids with map reading skills.

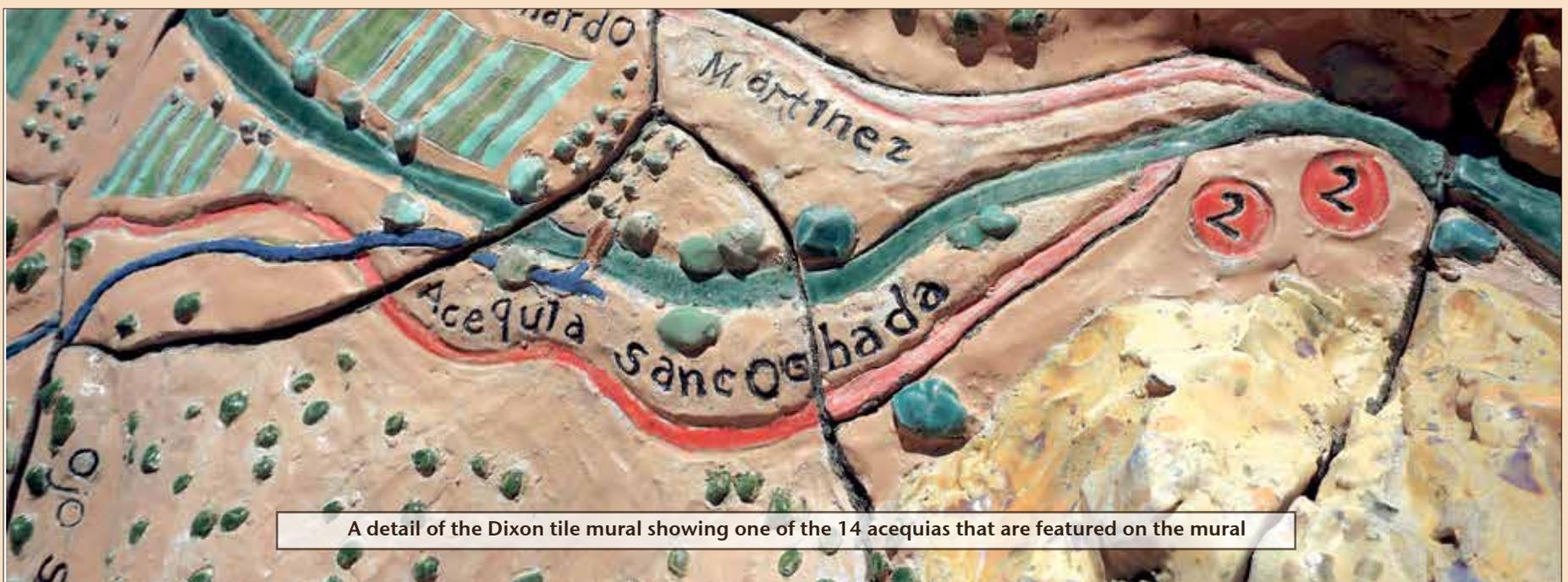
“People are interested in the lay of the land, often surprised that the Rio Embudo actually parallels the Rio Grande because when you turn into Dixon it feels like they are at right angles.

“For visitors, it is good for them to know that this place has a rich history too. People come through Dixon wondering if anything happens here. This will let them know that it does, and has for a long time.

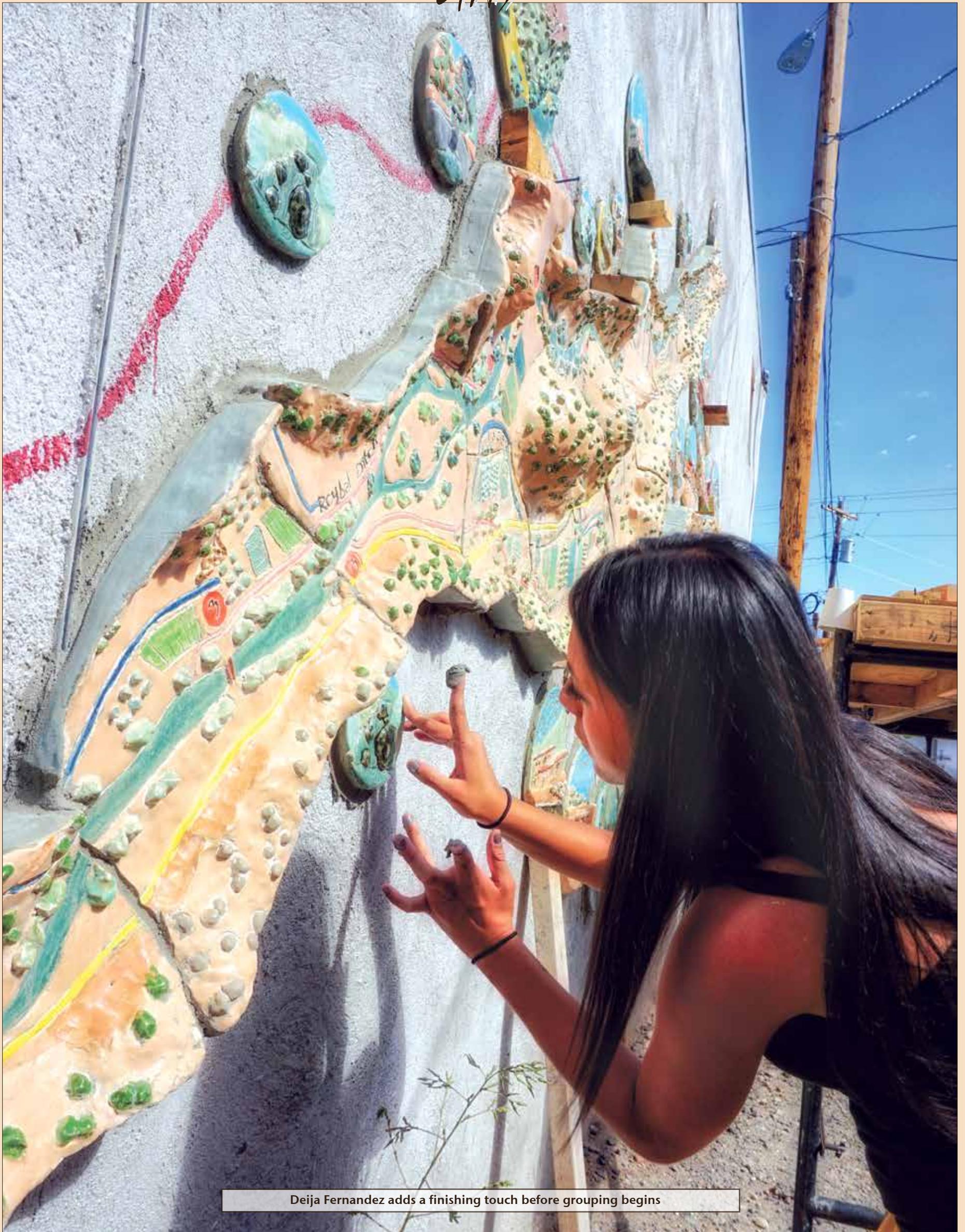
“The response has been great. Every time I go to Dixon several people come up and thank me. Almost always someone is studying it.”

The Dixon tile mural isn’t just pretty art, it’s a valuable lesson in history. It shows how public art can be used in a most positive manner.

You’ll definitely want to take a look.



A detail of the Dixon tile mural showing one of the 14 acequias that are featured on the mural



Deija Fernandez adds a finishing touch before grouping begins