Everyone at Ghost Ranch knew that for O’Keeffe, the ranch was no longer just a place to vacation, to take time out from the real world. Ghost Ranch was the real world, often the only world, and O’Keeffe’s time away from the ranch was becoming harder and harder to justify. On the flight back to New York after a long, satisfying summer-fall stay at Ghost Ranch, O’Keeffe wrote a friend, “It is no use to write about any more of the trip. I have left the good country—I must get myself in order for the other other kind of life with the dawn—”

Although she would not be able to live year-round in the good country until after Stieglitz’s death in 1946, in 1940 O’Keeffe became an owner of a small piece of it. After a year’s absence from New Mexico, O’Keeffe returned to Ghost Ranch in June—unannounced and unexpected—and planned to stay for six months. The ranch had a spare cottage for O’Keeffe, but Rancho de los Burros was already spoken for. O’Keeffe was furious, although Pack reminded her that the Burros House was his to rent as he pleased. O’Keeffe suggested that in order to keep the peace, Pack sell her the house. Pack agreed, and after rearranging his guests, let O’Keeffe move into her beloved house under the cliffs.

Several months later, on the thirtieth day of October, 1940, Rancho de los Burros became the first home owned by Georgia O’Keeffe. She was approaching her fifty-third birthday, and the house and its eight acres on the red and yellow badlands cost O’Keeffe six thousand dollars. It included the house and portal, the Pack family’s clay tennis court, the corral and shed once occupied by the baby antelope, and a 360-degree view of the faraway country. The adobe house was a tiny dot in an enormous, uninhabited landscape. To O’Keeffe it was the precise center of paradise. “I have bought a house out here,” she wrote her friend Ettie Stettheimer, “the one I have lived in the past three years here—It is for me a nice house and I like being here. I am about 100 miles from the railroad—68 from Santa Fe—95 from Taos—40 miles from town—18 miles from a post office and it is good... so far away that no one ever comes—I suppose I am odd but I do like the far away.”

Although the Burros House was lacking in creature comforts and seemed to always need repair and structural help from Pack’s maintenance staff, it was O’Keeffe’s dream home for the rest of her life. She wrote her friend, Maria Chabot, “I can think of no greater luxury than being at the ranch—even if the lights didn’t work and the sink wouldn’t drain.”

O’Keeffe’s relationship with Ghost Ranch and New Mexico was now formalized. Inherent to this relationship was O’Keeffe’s deeply satisfying commitment to her work, her solitude, and her happiness. Her boundaries were now marked and drawn. Everything she needed and wanted was
within her reach, and everyone she did not want was far, far away. O’Keeffe wrote a friend, “I seem to be really most interested in the ranch and nobody.”

O’Keeffe had declared her love for Ghost Ranch, but she still loved and returned home to be with her aging husband, Alfred Stieglitz. Dividing her life, and herself, between Ghost Ranch and Manhattan was an arrangement that O’Keeffe and Stieglitz accepted until Stieglitz’s death, in 1946. Stieglitz never came to the Southwest, but even from so great a distance, he came to understand through her letters and paintings the intensity of his wife’s relationship with the place called Ghost Ranch. In the last month of Stieglitz’s life O’Keeffe returned to Ghost Ranch. Stieglitz wrote her, “I greet you on your coming once more to your own country.”

Ghost Ranch was O’Keeffe’s own country for the remainder of her long life. And even after decades of summers in the house under the shining stone cliffs, O’Keeffe was uncertain she would ever find a better place. “When I think of death, O’Keeffe said when she was in her late seventies, “I only regret that I will not be able to see this beautiful country anymore, unless the Indians are right and my spirit will walk here after I’m gone.”

Images: *Red and Yellow Cliffs*, 1940
*Red Hills and White Flower*, 1937