Iole Bachechi could hardly believe her ears. Puccini was on a train headed to the West. The great Italian operatic composer Giacomo Puccini’s La fanciulla del West, based on the play Girl of the Golden West, had debuted at the Metropolitan Opera in New York in 1910. At the time, Puccini promised to visit the scene of his opera one day. Iole could hardly contain her excitement. Puccini was a native of Lucca in Tuscany, the hometown of Iole’s mother, Maria Bacheci. As it turned out, there was a Puccini on the train when it pulled into Albuquerque, but it was not the famous celebrity of the music world. Instead the traveler was Luigi Puccini, Giacomo’s cousin, and he was a journalist rather than a world-renowned composer. No matter. Luigi met Iole, and the couple married in 1914. Luigi Puccini eventually followed his more famous cousin into the entertainment world. He became the owner of the Pass Time Theater in Albuquerque in 1922. Two years later he relocated to Gallup and opened The Rex Theater. Meanwhile, Iole’s parents built the Kimo Theater in Albuquerque. There Luigi built the original Puccini Building (now the Golden West Saloon), which housed various businesses. In 1941 the bar was joined with the construction of the El Rey Theater. The saloon and theater became the “new” Puccini Building, a rare example of Mediterranean architecture in New Mexico. Today couples can marry at the site, an echo of the unlikely love story that started it all.

Centennial Journeys is made possible by the Office of the State Historian, New Mexico Arts (a division of the Department of Cultural Affairs) and KUNM in Albuquerque.