



2023
Volume 2

Tracking the Wily Coyote Travels with Trapper Joe by Pat O'Neill

I was having my budget breakfast of stand-up coffee, two near-petrified eggs and soggy toast at the Silt Café in Silt, Colorado, when I first saw the old fellow they called “Trapper Joe.”

As he walked in the door and crossed the floor to a table in the back, the locals all nodded and tipped their coffee cups in his direction, then went back to complaining about the elk that were eating hay meant for their cattle, or bemoaning that year’s allotment for water to flood irrigate their alfalfa fields -- or whatever was most on their minds that winter.

When the old fellow with the wind-scorched face and black peppered beard sat down with his back to us, I asked one of the local ranch hands sitting across from me -- one known to tolerate dumb questions from a dumbass young reporter -- “Who is that guy?”

“That’s Joe Caywood. He kills coyotes for the ranchers,” answered the tolerant one. “A nice enough old coot. Just steer clear of him when he’s in the hooch, ‘cause he’s always got a gun, and he’s a hell of a good shot.”

Figuring the trapper was still sober by breakfast, I finished up my victuals, as they say in the old movies, and strolled outside and waited in the cold by his beat-to-shit, old, tan-colored four-wheel drive three-quarter ton Ford pickup that was encased in innumerable coats of mud and manure, and waited for him to come out.

When the coyote killer came out the door and into the gravel parking lot, he spotted me there by his truck, and gave me that nearly imperceptible nod that passes for a greeting in Western Colorado cow country. When he got to the truck and reached for the driver’s door handle, he stopped, turned around and looked at me with a half-cocked grin and a rascally twinkle in his eyes. I just couldn’t help but like him from the git-go.

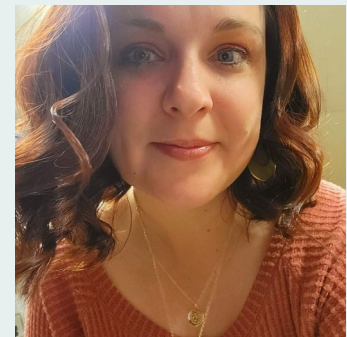
We talked by the truck for a good while, about shooting and trapping coyotes and mountain lions, about bounties and restrictions. After every question I

Jessica Brandt is the newly elected Rifle Heritage Center Board of Directors Secretary and Event Coordinator. She has been on the board since November 2021.

She started by volunteering to help set up the Ute Heritage Garden and help with the first Voices in the Darkness. Jessica is a wife and mother of two.

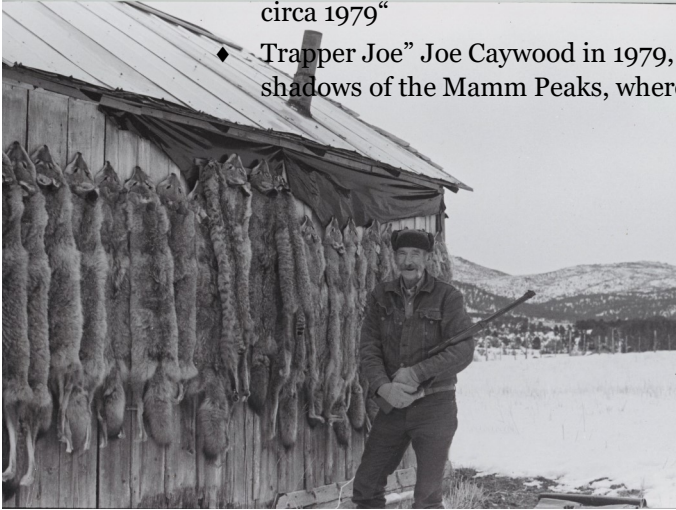
She volunteers as a Master Gardener with Garfield County CSU Extension and is a former AmeriCorps member. In the past, she has also volunteered for PTO organizations, Girl Scouts, & Boy Scouts.

Jessica and her husband, Lee, own and operate Timberscape Tree & Turf, specializing in plant healthcare. Both of their children are involved in archery through 4-H and S3DA. In her spare time, Jessica enjoys gardening in her yard, camping, paddle boarding, foraging, and being with her favorite people.

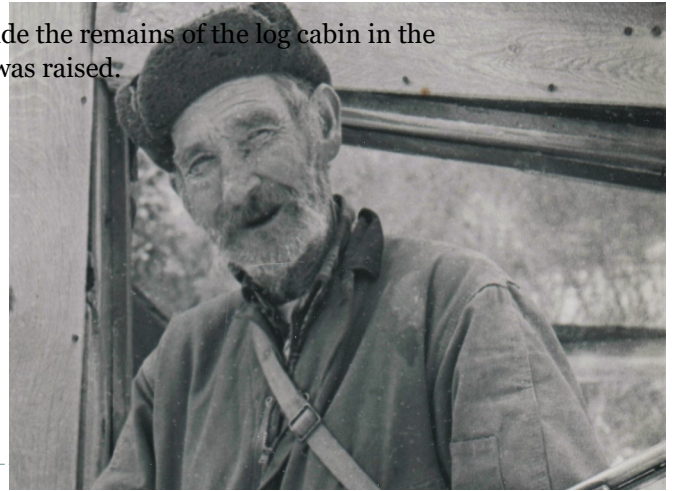


Photos courtesy of Pat O'Neill

- ◆ “Trapper Joe” with the pelts of coyotes and bobcats he had shot or trapped and hung on the wall of his skinning shed. Rural Garfield County, Western Colorado, circa 1979“



- ◆ “Trapper Joe” Joe Caywood in 1979, outside the remains of the log cabin in the shadows of the Mamm Peaks, where he was raised.



Joe died in the winter of 1984, at the age of 70. His obituary in the Grand Junction Daily Sentinel mentioned only that, “He enjoyed trapping and was interested in the outdoors.”

Trapper Joe (con’t)
asked him, he’d grin and look at me as if I was talking in a foreign tongue as indecipherable as that of the Basque sheepherders that tended huge flocks of the woolies on the grassy mesas atop the striated Bookcliffs that loomed up behind us.

Finally, he threw up his hands and said. “I guess ahl just have ta show yih. Meet me tahmarree mornin’, five miles up the Mamm Creek road. Be there when the sun comes up. And dress warm.” Then he climbed stiffly into his old beater, bounced through the tire-eating pot-holes of the parking lot and onto the frontage road, bound for some rancher’s coyote infested pasture.

By dawn the next day I was ready for some horseback riding and coyote killin.’ But

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when I got to the trailhead where the trapper was parked, I was both happy and deflated to see two shiny snowmobiles on a trailer behind his truck. The snow that far above the Colorado River was easily three or four feet deep. I didn’t figure that was a good time to tell him I’d never driven a snowmobile before.

Into the silence of the snow

We soon took off and, after almost hitting a fence and taking a couple hundred yards of barbed wire home with me, I got the hang of my mechanical cow pony. In a few minutes, we breached a high ridgetop, and the trapper motioned me to stop and shut off the engine. We were looking out over a Christmas storyland of rolling hills and tiny valleys marked by groves of aspens and pine, all painted over with white sugar frosting. An easy breeze blew up, twisting snow devils all around us and above was a royal blue, borderless sky.

“Down there,” the trapper said quietly, pointing to a small cluster of pines in a large ravine marked by shadow, maybe a half-mile off. Squinting through the glare coming off the great expanse of snow before me, I could see nothing special about the shadowed ravine he was pointing to.

We pushed on toward the shadowed dip in the snow, and when we slid down into it, I could then see the leaning frame of a long-abandoned log cabin, its roof sagging and broken, its door missing from the rusted hinges. The years had nearly reclaimed the old Caywood homestead.

Joe climbed off his snowmobile and, his worn Winchester rifle padding against his back, high-stepped stiff-legged through the deep snow, following the barely visible swale of an ancient wagon road down to the empty doorway of the decrepit cabin. He stopped and stared at the snow for a



Betty Clark was born in 1919 and grew up in Rifle. She became enthralled with flight at an early age through the mentorship of her father.

Betty flew for the WASPs from 1942-1944 and then entered the Air Force reserves until 1958.

Betty was called “Buzz Betty” when she made two generals and three colonels hit the dirt once when she misjudged her altitude.

She returned to Rifle after her service and together with Pat Sullivan, a fellow WASP, operated the airport and owned and operated a air-agriculture service until her retirement in the 1980’s.



Chipeta was born around 1843 and grew up in the Rocky Mountains of Colorado as part of the nomadic Ute people.

She married Chief Ouray who was regarded as the de facto leader of the Utes by the US government. She was a quiet but potent force in his leadership and came to be known as Chipeta, queen of the Utes.

She lived through the horrendous happenings of the early 1880’s campaign of “the Utes must go” in Colorado.

She was forcibly removed to eastern Utah with the rest of her people where she died 44 years later.

Her last recorded words were, “I desire nothing. What is good enough for my people is good enough for me.”



Voices in the Dark

For the past two years RHC has hosted an event during the last of October where the public can make a night out by visiting the museum and enjoying character studies of historical figures presented in a first person by volunteers.

It is one thing to learn history by the events that occurred and by the location in which they took place but making history connect with us is a whole different story. Through these first person narratives, the Heritage Center is seeking to help people connect with the robust and entertaining history of our area.

To the left are two of the characters who have had their stories come to life at this event in the past. Who knows who you’ll meet this year!

So if you enjoyed Pat’s story about Trapper Joe, plan on joining us in October to meet some of the colorful characters of our past.

Photos are taken from the web

Trapper Joe (con't)

moment, then pointed with an arthritic finger to a spot outside a slumping window frame.

"See them tracks by the cabin? Coyote. Same sumbitch I tried to get 50 years ago. Probably lookin' for some more o' Momma's chickens," he said with a guffaw that left his mouth in a funnel of white frost.

Over his shoulder he said, "Used ta go after 'im when I was a little bitty kid. Never could catch 'im though, and he shore done a job on them chickens!" His knobby gray head shook back and forth. "I've stayed awake a lot of nights tryin' ta out think 'im since them days."

Tagging along with Joe as he checked his traps that day, I learned trapping coyotes ran ran deep and red in the Caywood blood. In fact, it was bounty money that fed young Joe and his dozen or so brothers and sisters, and built the now decaying cabin on Mamm Creek.

"Wolfer" Caywood, as Joe's father was known, was one of the most written-about government trappers of the 1920s and '30s. His trapping skills and ability to think like the lobo were such that his feats – the capture of such killer wolves as "The Gray Terror," "Old Rags" and "The Greenhorn Wolf" – are documented in the book "The Last Stand of the Pack," by Arthur Carhart. It was with the blessings of the U.S. Government that "Wolfer" Caywood tracked down the last gray wolf in Colorado in 1923.

But there is a philosophy that was handed down in the Caywood cabin, along with occupational secrets and an envied recipe for "stink bait." That philosophy was documented in Carhart's book when the elder Caywood was asked if he enjoyed the kill.

History provides us with a sense of identity. People need to develop a sense of their collective past. Events in the past have made us what we are today.

"Yes and no," he said. "I've just got a lot of love and respect for the wolf. He's a real fellow, the big gray is, lots of brains... I guess I'm too much a part of his outdoors to hold a grudge against animals."

The family business came naturally to Trapper Joe ever since, armed with a 50-cent .22 with a bent barrel, he went after the coyote that played hell with his Momma's chickens. At the age of nine he was accompanying his father on the trap lines, watching and learning. And skipping school.

"I sat on my horse and watched every trap he set, and near as I could tell, I was settin' 'em just like he was settin' 'em," Joe recalled for me. "But I wasn't catchin' nothin'. I was leavin' too much of a human scent, is

all I can figure, and movin' my traps too much, like a little kid with a fishin' pole. "I'll tell you, in the way of nature. I could never have read all that in a book or learnt that in a classroom nowhere in the world. There is no book that could be written that would include what I learnt about wildlife out there with my dad."

At the end of the day, tromping around Joe's skinning shed situated lower down on the mesa, I was trying to figure out how to write this story for the paper I worked for back in town. I liked the old fellow, but I knew that whatever I'd write would stir up all the relative newcomers to that country.

Joe was already an evil poster boy for the environmentalists and animal lovers in western Colorado. He was, to them, a symbol of all that was wrong in a world of waste and cruelty.

When I mentioned that, Joe gave me that half-grin and old eye-twinkle, and said: "I guess when the coyotes start eatin' the environmentalists, they won't have no objection to me goin' in and trappin' 'em. But ta tell ya the truth; I don't think none of the coyotes I know would eat on of 'em." And he laughed.

Joe's days back then began in the limbo of predawn. He would pile his arsenal of bullets and cyanide pellets in that beat-up three-quarter ton Ford pick-up of his and, by light, he'd be on the trail of the coyote dog.

"It's an occupation," he told me with a shrug. "An occupation I love. Believe me when I say, I gotta lot o' respect for the animal I'm after. Me, I take a few and leave a few. I don't want 'em all; that wouldn't be right. I'll tell you why. The good Lord put that old dog here for a reason. They do a lot of good for the country. But someone's got to keep their population



Uncle Bob Mountain

As told by Mary Jane (Boulton) Hangs to Kathy Runia

Photos: Top– Lists of John Bottom– photo of painting by Jack Roberts from The Art Center collection in Grand Junction

The early settlers of the Boulton family came to the area in the late 1800s. Bob (Robert E.) and his wife, Sadie, built a cabin up Divide Creek. Bob hunted to provide meat for his family, and happened to be on the mountain when he ran across a huge bear. He was able to take the bear down before the bear could get him. As the story was shared throughout the area, a new name started being used for that mountain, “Uncle Bob Mountain.”



The museum will open on May 17th this year. It will be open on Wednesday through Saturday from 10 to 4.

Our address is 337 East Ave so pop in to see some great history, get a Rifle t-shirt or really cool book about the Rifle Volunteer Fire Department, check out volunteer opportunities or chat with our wonderful volunteer staff.

You can see more about the museum on our website at rifleheritagecenter.com.

You can also find us on Facebook.

Hope to see you soon.

Trapper Joe (con't)
down to within reason. And I gotta make a living.”

In the early 1970s, seeing the string-bean figure of Joe Caywood leading a horse or guiding that old truck through the high country sage of the oil-rich Piceance Basin was thought of no differently than the mail man, the vet or the farrier. His was a service as respectable and necessary to the ranch people as the Co-op and Monkey Wards.

At the end of that day, as the sun was sinking over North Mamm Peak, just before I had to hightail it back to the Rifle Tribune

and crank out a story, Joe stubbed out a Camel cigarette and pointed to his grizzly gray head.

“You got to be pretty near like the critters, and you don’t learn that over night. What’s stored in the back of this old skull of mine has been put back there through the years – not just in the last two or three days.”

He picked a burr out of the hide of a coyote pelt stretched out on a wooden frame and flicked it away with his index finger. “You got to have a lot of respect for this animal here. You got ta like this animal. ‘Cause if you don’t, you ain’t gonna catch ‘em.”

“Trapper Joe” had spent years perfecting the stink bait that lured hundreds of coyotes to his traps, which he set in strategic spots around ranchers’ fields and feed barns. But, he admitted that traps have a tendency to freeze to the ground. When that happened, he had no qualms about shooting them on the run, using deadly cyanide pellets.

Increasingly, though, ranchers back then were hiring marksmen who would shoot from helicopters, and strafe random coyotes they spotted anywhere on the mesas.

“Now that’s somepun’ different,” Joe mumbled, shaking his head. “I’d like to see that stopped. That ain’t right. All they’re doin’ is killin’ off a bunch of innocent coyotes. At least they ought to give the old dog a fightin’ chance.”

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