

ON THE EDGE OF SOMETHING BIG

After decades as an ordinary gift shop inside one of the South Rim's most extraordinary structures, Desert View Watchtower is entering a new era as the centerpiece for the Desert View Inter-Tribal Cultural Heritage Site, a collaborative project between the National Park Service, Grand Canyon Conservancy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and a working group consisting of members of Arizona's 11 American Indian tribes with cultural and spiritual connections to the Canyon. BY MATT JAFFE



Desert View Watchtower looks as if it's been standing on the edge of the Grand Canyon for 1,000 years. Rising 70 feet, the circular stone structure appears to emerge straight out of the Earth, as naturally as the junipers growing nearby along the rim.

The watchtower is perfectly imperfect, the product of architect Mary Elizabeth Jane Colter's obsessive attention to detail and her use of uncut stones found nearby, each placed just so to create the shadows and textures she was seeking.

"Time, the lost principle in much modern construction, was taken to select each rock for the outer walls," Colter would write in her *Manual for Drivers and Guides*, a detailed document she created to answer questions Grand Canyon tour guides might have about the tower.

Colter bristled at the notion that the tower was a reproduction, replica or copy of any single structure. Nor did she want visitors to think it was a restoration of an existing Ancestral Puebloan building that had stood on the site. Instead, Col-

ter based the tower's design on features she noted at an assortment of ancient sites she visited and studied around the Southwest, including Mesa Verde National Park, in Colorado, and the circular towers at Hovenweep National Monument, along the Utah-Colorado border. She preferred to call the watchtower a "re-creation" and wrote, "It is not an exact reproduction of any known ruin; but, rather, is based on fine examples of the prehistoric workman, and is built in the Indian spirit."

Colter's 1932 "re-creation" is now being reimagined as the centerpiece for the Desert View Inter-Tribal Cultural Heritage Site, a project between the National Park Service, Grand Canyon Conservancy, the Bureau of Indian Affairs and a working group consisting of members of Arizona's 11 American Indian tribes with cultural and spiritual connections to the Canyon.

Often described as the most American of places, Grand Canyon National Park has not always been a welcoming

The Grand Canyon's Desert View Watchtower overlooks the Colorado River and the snowy South Rim at sunrise. Claire Curran

place for American Indians. The human presence in the Canyon dates back at least 12,000 years, but over the past 150 years, the region's tribes have frequently been cut off from their ancestral lands and excluded from park decision-making. At the rededication of the tower in 2016, then-Superintendent Dave Ueberuaga formally apologized and

asked forgiveness on behalf of the Park Service and his 23 predecessors. He declared the Desert View area "a place for all tribes to call their own."

The project is the first of its kind in the national park system. "This is a generational shift," says Jan Balsom, senior adviser for stewardship and tribal programs at the Canyon. "It will take generations to transform Desert View into the place we want it to be: where tribal members staff the site, tell the history and demonstrate the artwork. It's a long-



term investment in change — to change the dynamic so the parks aren't in charge and we're working in collaboration with tribal members to make this site work.”

The heritage site aims to turn the watchtower and the Desert View area into an Indian community gathering place where park visitors can learn about and experience tribal cultures directly from craftspeople, dancers and storytellers. The guiding concept is “First Voice”: the idea that Indigenous people should relate their own histories, contemporary experiences and aspirations for the future, rather than having these stories filtered through intermediaries from outside their communities.

Talk to park rangers, and they'll tell you many visitors wonder where the Canyon's tribes have gone. The fact, of course, is that they never left. These Indigenous people still live here, as they have for countless generations. As Havasupai medicine woman Dianna Uqualla said in a video produced

With the watchtower's gift shop removed, members of tribes with ties to the Canyon have begun to view the structure in a different light.
Michael Quinn, National Park Service

by Grand Canyon Conservancy: “Our history, of the Havasupai people, this is their aboriginal homeland. This is where our first beginning, our people were. A lot of this land base right here has our ancestors' footsteps, our ancestors being here. Living off the land. This whole Canyon as a whole is a very sacred, sacred place in our eyes. And we still, the Havasupai, exist. And we still watch over it as much as we can.”

For travelers arriving from the east along State Route 64, Desert View Watchtower is a must-stop — their first chance to peer into the abyss and take in a panorama that includes a long stretch of the Colorado River, from Unkar Delta to the confluence with the Little Colorado River and into Marble Canyon, before extending more than

100 miles out to the Painted Desert.

Just as the project reimagines the watchtower, which is listed on the National Register of Historic Places with three other Colter masterpieces (Hopi House, Lookout Studio and Hermits Rest), it may also help visitors rethink the Grand Canyon itself. Most visitors regard the Canyon as a geological wonder to hike and explore. Or they come to simply stand along the rim and take in views of the mile-deep labyrinth of eroded stone that extends for 277 miles across Arizona. In fairness, it's easy to be overwhelmed by the overwhelming, and the scale and majesty of the Canyon means tourists typically end up thinking of it solely as a natural landscape, rather than a cultural one. But tucked into alcoves within the Canyon are the stone walls of dwellings and granaries built centuries ago. And right off the highway, about 3 miles from Desert View, is 800-year-old Tusayan Ruin, the most accessible of the 4,000 archaeological sites in the park.

When you look out from the watch-

tower, you're seeing Navajo, Hopi and other tribal lands, as well as the San Francisco Peaks, which are sacred to multiple tribes. Indian lands border the national park for hundreds of miles. The 11 Canyon tribes themselves are hardly monolithic: Their cultures are rich and varied, with distinct languages, traditions, histories and beliefs. The Zuni people regard the Canyon as a place of origin, and according to Hopi tradition, the Canyon is where their people emerged into our world. Havasupai territory reaches from the rim all the way down to the river. Some Havasupais live deep within the Canyon, growing corn, squash and beans not far from the turquoise waterfalls and pools that gave the tribe its name, which translates to “People of the Blue-Green Waters.” But

for nearly a century, until 185,000 acres of the plateau were returned to the tribe in 1975, the Havasupais were displaced from the rim and restricted to just 518 acres along the Canyon bottom.

The park borders the Navajo Nation to the east, and in many ways, that administrative boundary contributes to a sense that the park is somehow separate from the surrounding lands. There have also been tensions about regulations that restricted traditional practices, from piñon pine nut gathering to prohibitions on artisans setting up stands or tables to sell works inside the park.

Mae Franklin previously worked as Navajo tribal liaison to the Kaibab National Forest and the national park, and she now represents the tribe on the park's Inter-Tribal Advisory Council.

She believes the heritage site is part of a growing effort to recognize the tribes' legitimate stake at the Canyon.

“This is our homeland; it's part of what we have known all of these years,” Franklin says. “The Park Service had to deal with these issues and needed to change, because they knew we weren't going to go away. ... They took the concessionaire out and put Desert View back under the park, so that the park could work with the tribes and give the voice back to the tribes. That's what this is. Providing a place where we can tell our stories, where we can have a voice. We're hoping it's not the only place in the park. But it is a beginning, and our community is starting to understand that the park is listening and responding in a responsible way.”

As project planning began, it was essential to hear Indigenous voices from the earliest stages. But bringing the tribes together with park representatives wasn't as simple as putting everyone in a conference room and checking items off an agenda, says Sammie Meadows, a writer, historian and expert in Indigenous tourism who took part in the meetings as a representative of the American Indian Alaska Native Tourism Association (AIANTA). Trust issues, both with the Park Service and in some cases between the tribes, couldn't be ignored.

“The first thing to do was to gingerly feel out how much each group could trust the other one, as well as the Park Service, because of the way the park was established,” Meadows says. “There was a lot to overcome, even though there's been cooperation over many, many years protecting cultural sites in the Canyon and water flows. But First Voice interpretation and [having] a place of our own was a big step beyond that. During some of those early meetings, there was a lot of griping about the Park Service: ‘Yeah,

THE 11 CANYON TRIBES THEMSELVES ARE HARDLY MONOLITHIC: THEIR CULTURES ARE RICH AND VARIED, WITH DISTINCT LANGUAGES, TRADITIONS, HISTORIES AND BELIEFS.

yeah, you say this, but you never come through.’ There was plenty of that. And every time new park leadership came along, everyone would hold their breath. But people are more trusting now.”

Colter said she built the tower with an Indian spirit, and the question was how to turn Desert View back into a place Indians would feel belonged to them, instead of serving as just another overlook. Historically, the area had been an Indigenous gathering place, and Colter wrote that Hopi artist Fred Kabotie, who painted the tower’s magnificent interior murals, told her the point was a Hopi landmark that identified “a boundary to their ancestral domain.”

As the group began to consider physical improvements to the site, differing cultural perspectives quickly became evident, says Theresa McMullan, executive director of Grand Canyon Conservancy. “We were walking the grounds and talking about what type of fencing or barriers you would put in along the paths,” she recalls. “Some of the tribal members were kind of shaking their heads and said, ‘We don’t have barriers, we don’t have borders.’ To think about that — once you start thinking about things from different perspectives — it really opens your mind, which is so important right now.”

Meadows says tribal members also wanted a bread oven, because the aroma of bread baking outdoors would be a sensory reminder of their own communities. And they resisted changes that may have been appropriate for a park pullout, but less so for a tribal area. “One part of the plans and drawings showed a pathway that goes all the way around the rim, on beyond the watchtower,” she says. “At first, they were talking about maybe putting in benches

and interpretive signs, and the tribes said, ‘Well, how about if you don’t put in any of that, just make that a trail? We can use that area if we want to do a sunrise ceremony or take our kids out there for some teaching. That could be for us.’ I think that’s what they’re going to do in that area, instead of designing it as the endpoint of visitation.”

AIANTA secured a \$500,000 grant for cultural programs and restoration work from ArtPlace America, a public-private partnership that advocates for incorporating the arts into community planning and economic development. Before the tower closed and events were suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic, tribal members conducted demonstrations of pottery making, silversmithing and weaving. There were also dances and storytelling that gave participants the chance to take control of their cultural narratives. As Meadows says, “If you don’t tell your own story, someone else will.”

That can make a huge difference, as Franklin discovered on Colorado River trips with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous guides. “It’s like night and day,” she says. “With some river guides, the trips are kind of a party thing. With the tribes, they say prayers. That totally changed the experience.”

For decades, any notion that the watchtower was some ancient structure quickly dissipated as you entered not a sacred kiva, but a gift shop selling all manner of Canyon souvenirs and bric-a-brac. Meadows says the removal of the store and establishment of the heritage area is changing how tribal members perceive the watchtower itself. “I just remember in the beginning, when I first got



involved, hearing some of those guys joking, ‘Well, if they had asked us when they first put the thing up, we’d tell ’em [to] just push it over the edge. We could still come in some night and push it over the edge.’” she says. “They used to make jokes like that. And then, more recently, because of the artist demonstration projects and clearing out the concession, guys say, ‘We’re going to live with this thing. It’s finally doing us some good.’”

With the retail clutter banished, Colter’s kiva — what she called the View Room, thanks to its large windows — again opens unobstructed to the Canyon. It’s also much easier to appreciate the detailed craftwork, including the stone pilasters and, most notably, the elaborate cribbed-log ceiling, constructed using a traditional technique Colter had observed in the pueblo at Aztec Ruins National Monument in New Mexico. Cut 43 years earlier, the logs used in the

ceiling were salvaged from the demolished Grandview Hotel.

For all of her respect for Indigenous cultures, Colter engaged in practices that today would not only be considered culturally insensitive, but also violate current federal law protecting antiquities. In addition to the stone from nearby canyons, she incorporated sections of ancient petroglyphs removed from sites near Ash Fork and Joseph City. If the stones in the tower walls weren’t just right, Colter ordered the crew to remove them and start over. Some of the men who worked on the tower dubbed her “Old Lady Colter,” although, in fairness, she did face the challenge of directing an all-male crew.

From the kiva, you once had to pay a quarter to go through the turnstile and enter the tower itself before slowly ascending the curving walkways to view Kabotie’s murals. Those murals have been painstakingly restored by hand to bring back the vividness of the original gold, pink, brown and turquoise oil-based pigments Kabotie used. Time and weathering, from rain and snowmelt that seeped through the stone walls and created salt deposits, had taken a toll.

Fred’s grandson Ed Kabotie, a musi-

ABOVE, LEFT: Hopi artist Fred Kabotie paints one of the watchtower’s murals in 1932. Courtesy of Grand Canyon National Park Museum Collection

ABOVE: A conservator works on one of Kabotie’s murals during the recent restoration. Michael Quinn, National Park Service

cian and artist, worked on the mural restoration team. As he said in 2016: “This was a real thrill to me, to be able to come out here and work on a historic building of my grandfather. It’s very powerful for me. This watchtower, to me, represents a very different time and a very different relationship. It represents a time when the Canyon had a very interactive relationship with tribes. So many different cultures come to this place every day. The conservation project, in some ways, is like a revitalization of the relationship between the Canyon and the tribes.”

If Colter aimed to infuse the tower with the Indian spirit, it is Kabotie’s murals, as well as pictographs painted on the ceiling by artist Fred Geary and based on the rock art from a cave in New Mexico, that truly give the building its soul. Colter described Kabotie as “one of the three greatest modern Indian artists” before later writing, “Every

line he draws is as sure as truth itself.” But — proving that cross-cultural communication problems are not an exclusively contemporary phenomenon at the Canyon — she and Kabotie sometimes clashed. A stubborn perfectionist, Colter was committed to her vision, and as Kabotie diplomatically put it, “Miss Colter was a very talented decorator with strong opinions, and quite elderly. I admired her work, and we got along well ... most of the time.”

By the standards of the Canyon’s tribes, the murals, even at nearly 90 years old, are recent works. Despite their age, Kabotie’s depictions of the Snake Dance and Hopi legends hint at something deeper and far more ancient at the Canyon. “That’s a lot of what Fred Kabotie was trying to show inside the watchtower,” Meadows says. “It’s about the land and the story of Hopi. When people start looking at the Canyon as someone’s home for 12,000 years, everything changes in their brain cells. It changes their thinking.”

Now, thanks to the Desert View Inter-Tribal Cultural Heritage Site, it’s up to the rest of us to open our minds and start listening to the true voices of the Grand Canyon. [AH](#)

COLTER SAID SHE BUILT THE TOWER WITH AN INDIAN SPIRIT, AND THE QUESTION WAS HOW TO TURN DESERT VIEW BACK INTO A PLACE INDIANS WOULD FEEL BELONGED TO THEM, INSTEAD OF SERVING AS JUST ANOTHER OVERLOOK.

Horses move in the light of sunset on an Eastern Arizona ranch. In Arizona and elsewhere, horses are an enduring symbol of Western culture. SCOTT BAXTER

THE MANE COURSE

*The history of horses in North America began about 5 million years ago. They were here, and then, about 11,000 years ago, they appear to have disappeared. Their return to Arizona dates to 1540, when Francisco Vázquez de Coronado came looking for gold. Since then, horses have played an integral role in the state's history. They've been militarized for conquest, they revolutionized transportation, and they helped domesticate the wilds by making large-scale ranching possible. **BY MATT JAFFE***



ARIZONA'S STORY IS INSEPARABLE FROM the story of horses. From the Spanish *entrada*, through the Mexican era, and into the period when Arizona became part of the United States, horses have played an integral role, reshaping the land and both disrupting and transforming the American Indian societies that had been here for thousands of years.

Horses were militarized for conquest, revolutionized transportation and helped domesticate the wilds by making large-scale ranching possible. If no longer as central to daily life in our digital age, horses retain a hold on many Arizonans for recreation and sport, and as a connection to the past.

Arizona's equine culture is as diverse as the state itself. Scottsdale is a hub of the Arabian horse world, and each year, 2,400 of these statuesque animals, with their distinctive dished faces, compete in the Scottsdale Arabian Horse Show. But Scottsdale is also the end of the trail for the rough-and-ready Hashknife Pony Express, an officially sanctioned U.S. Postal Service operation that, every January, delivers 20,000 pieces of mail carried 200 miles from Holbrook and through Payson.

For the state's tribes, horses retain a deep spiritual meaning. During the 2020 election, Allie Young, a Navajo activist, organized a series of ritual trail rides to the polls to symbolize a commitment to the Earth and pay tribute to tribal ancestors. As Kelsey Dayle John — a University of Arizona assistant professor of gender and women's studies and American Indian studies, whose work has focused on horses — says: "From my worldview as a Navajo person, I believe that horses are people. They have all of the characteristics necessary to be considered a person. They have their own stories, and they would tell the story about their history. Would it be the same one that humans tell? Who knows? Maybe not."

Consider the story of the Wilbur-Cruce herd. They are true Arizona horses, hearty survivors shaped by the land and descended from the very first horses that came into this part of the Southwest more than three centuries ago. For more than 110 years, the herd remained largely isolated on

a remote borderland ranch northwest of Nogales, where the unforgiving desert terrain of ocotillo and mesquite, as well as the ever-present threat of mountain lions, challenged and strengthened them. Over the years, the horses also outlasted range wars, rustlers, drought and drug traffickers.

Named after Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce, the ranch's third-generation owner, these animals are perhaps the closest living descendants of the Spanish Barb horses that arrived in the Americas with the earliest expeditions from Europe. A cross between Iberian and North African breeds, they are a living link to an earlier Arizona and beyond — they go all the way back to the Moorish invasion of Spain in the 8th century.

More specifically, the herd traces a direct line to the horses that Father Eusebio Francisco Kino, the Italian-born Jesuit priest, brought north into the Pimería Alta, as Southern Arizona and Northern Sonora were then known. In her book *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*, Wilbur-Cruce — granddaughter of Dr. Reuben Augustus Wilbur, the Harvard-educated physician who homesteaded the property in 1867 — recounted how these horses became part of her family's and Arizona's heritage.

In 1877, a livestock trader named Juan Zepulveda arrived in Arizona while transporting 600 horses from the ranch at Mission Nuestra Señora de los Dolores in Sonora, where Kino had established his breeding operation. Bound for an auction at the stockyards in Kansas City, Zepulveda stopped at the Wilbur property as he visited ranches in Arizona to check for interested buyers. Wilbur bought a *manada*, a breeding group of 25 mares and a stallion.

In her book, Wilbur-Cruce called them "rock horses" for their deftness in traversing the steep, boulder-strewn terrain. While the Morgans her grandfather had brought from Colorado couldn't survive the ranch's conditions, she wrote, "the Spanish horses thrived in the desert and were the horses of the day. They were our companions from sunup to sundown and sometimes deep into the night, year in and year out. They had speed, stamina and intelligence, and, strange as it may seem, they had feelings. I have seen them die heartbroken."

She continued, "And so the Spanish horses were made for the country and were much like the country itself, rugged and beautiful."

IN MOST TELLINGS, the story of horses in Arizona begins with the Spanish: Deep within Canyon de Chelly National Monument, near Standing Cow Ruin in Canyon del Muerto, a large Navajo pictograph panel depicts a Spanish cavalry unit on horseback. Riders wielding lances wear capes and hats with broad brims and flat



A Navajo Nation wild horse — one of perhaps 50,000 on the tribe's sprawling territory — eyes its photographer at sunset near Red Mesa.
MYLO FOWLER

crowns. One horseman's cape is dark and emblazoned with a prominent cross. While this rock art is believed to date to the early 19th century, it's also an accurate depiction of the scenes Arizona's Indigenous people witnessed as the Spanish pushed into the region.

The first horses to appear in Arizona came with Francisco Vázquez de Coronado's 1540 expedition, which traveled up the eastern part of the state and included side explorations that led to the discovery of the Grand Canyon. Although it's correct to say the Spanish brought horses to the Western Hemisphere, it's more accurate to say that they brought them *back*. Because North America is the ancestral homeland of the earliest equids, which emerged

50 million to 55 million years ago.

At one time, as many as a dozen horse species lived in North America. Modern horses appeared between 4 million and 5 million years ago and eventually dispersed into Asia and other parts of the world via the Bering land bridge. But the animals disappeared from North America by about 11,000 years ago, possibly hunted into extinction or gradually succumbing to changing climate conditions during the ice age. Fossils of several horse species have been found at locations throughout Arizona.

Emergence, evolution, extinction and reintroduction by the Spanish: That's the accepted narrative of horses in the United States. But Indigenous people have lived in Arizona for at least 12,000 years, and John, the UA professor, notes that according to the traditions of many cultures, horses never left. Dr. Yvette Running Horse Collin, who operates an Alabama horse sanctuary, wrote a dissertation about the relationship between Indigenous people and the horse. Collin's argument, which has been disputed, is that when

Clayson Benally, a Navajo horseman and healer, shares a moment with his mare, Momma, at the Navajo Nation's Grand Falls. SCOTT BAXTER



taken together, fossil evidence, tribal stories and early Spanish accounts suggest horses never actually disappeared from North America and were already here when the Spanish arrived.

John says her Diné father believed in the sacred nature of horses and that they had been with the tribe from the beginning. “Tribes tell stories of horses being around prior to any contact with colonial folks,” she says. “It’s an interesting thing. The narrative of the horse as a colonial introduction, as a colonial tool, is not one that people are really willing to let go of. But Native people forever have been saying that the story doesn’t start at colonization — there’s actually a lot of story that happened way before that. They’re just not stories that have been recorded or written down.”

More than 140 years after Coronado’s expedition, Kino, who moved a step closer to sainthood last year, brought large numbers of horses into Arizona. Kino was many

John says it’s important to remember that horses’ role in Native cultures transcends functionality. “There’s definitely a shared working history, but also a deep respect and reverence for the being of the horse.”

things: explorer, mathematician, cartographer, astronomer, writer, skilled equestrian. Records indicate he rode as much as 50 miles a day and once traveled 1,500 miles by horse in 53 days to reach Mexico City. He became known as *El Misionero a Caballo*, “The Missionary on Horseback.”

On scores of expeditions, Kino established mission ranches that he stocked with horses and cattle, helping to establish the foundation for Arizona ranching. But even by Kino’s time, horses were increasingly common in Arizona. During the middle of the 17th century, as more horses escaped, were captured in raids and were acquired through trade with Pueblo communities, American Indians incorporated the animals into daily life. An estimated 1,500 horses became available after New Mexico’s Pueblo Revolt in 1680 forced residents to abandon Santa Fe, leaving the animals unguarded, and as Kino traveled north from Sonora in 1691, herds of horses freely ranged across the land, according to descriptions by members of his party.

Small and quick, and in an array of colors and paint markings, the Spanish Barb became the Indian pony of legend. The Apaches’ mastery of horsemanship, rivaled only

by that of the Comanches, allowed tribal groups to hunt with far greater efficiency and expand their territories. The animals also helped neutralize the Spaniards’ advantage as the Southern Apaches raided settlements, often for more horses and guns. As one National Park Service account described the changes the horse brought to the Chiricahua Apaches: “From the time they acquired the horse and developed a lifestyle incorporating raiding for livestock and booty and warfare based on revenge, the Chiricahuas were almost constantly in conflicts with Spaniards — priests, soldiers and settlers — who encroached on or were within striking distance of Apache traditional territory.”

In one famous raid, Apaches made off with a herd of 500 horses from the presidio in Tubac. The raids certainly worked both ways: Both Mexican and American forces frequently captured or killed the horses of American Indians as the cycle of frontier violence continued through most of the 19th century.

But John says it’s important to remember that horses’ role in Native cultures transcends functionality. “There’s definitely a shared working history, but also a deep respect and reverence for the being of the horse in a way that doesn’t just equate the horse to a form of technology, as a form of assistance or transportation,” she says. “Certainly, Native folks use horses for working, but one of the biggest things that I try to argue in my work is that while many Native societies may do the same things as non-Natives, they operate from a totally different worldview. When it comes to horses, they’re respected as a partner, but also respected as this creature to be considered as sacred and knowledgeable. And autonomous.”

WHEN THE UNITED STATES took control of Arizona, horses helped open up the territory for settlement, and the growing American presence not only changed human demographics, but also brought large numbers of non-Spanish horses into the territory. Cavalry regiments commonly used Morgan- and thoroughbred-rooted stock, preferring horses with darker, solid shades to better blend into the landscape. Individual units were organized by the colors of their mounts.

But if less statuesque and more mottled in coloring, Spanish mustangs and Indian horses were increasingly enlisted, because they were abundant and also better adapted to Arizona’s climate and terrain. None other than General George Crook, who actually preferred riding a mule while leading U.S. forces in the campaign against Geronimo, recognized the superiority of the Apaches’ horses, which easily outpaced the larger Morgans and thoroughbreds over any distance.

A young *charro* shows off his roping skills during a *charreada*, a Mexican variation on rodeo, at Rancho Ochoa in Phoenix. JILL RICHARDS

In 1858, the Butterfield Overland Mail stagecoach began operations and connected Arizona to points as far east as Memphis and St. Louis and as far west as San Francisco, spurring the growth of Tucson. Pulled by mules over the most challenging ground, stagecoaches averaged less than 5 miles per hour as they plodded and rumbled more than 400 miles across Arizona. Along the way, there were 27 stations where draft animals could be changed out and weary passengers could find momentary relief from the cramped, barely padded bench seating that did little to soften the jarring ride. The Butterfield ran for only a few years, but an extensive stagecoach network developed in Arizona, with some lines operating during the 1920s and well into the age of the automobile, as the Old West began to bump up against the New West.

In *A Beautiful, Cruel Country*, Wilbur-Cruce captured these tensions. She was as good with words as she was with a gun, and she wrote elegantly about Southern Arizona ranching life, including her memories of being awakened by a procession on its way to Arivaca for the fiesta on San Juan's Day: "The girls sat sidesaddle on their horses, their long skirts reaching below the stirrups. Their hats looked like baskets full of flowers, their ribbons flying on the soft morning air. Red ribbons were tied to the horses' bridles, and the young men wore tall Stetsons and colorful ties. One of them rode toward the door, strumming his guitar, leading the group in singing *Las Mañanitas*."

During the spring *corrida*, Wilbur-Cruce's father would join other riders to round up livestock that had strayed over the range during winter. Wilbur-Cruce recalled a conversation with Barreplata, a ranch hand who first lived on the property in 1865, that took place as her father rode off with the remuda, sending dust into the desert sky:

"[Barreplata said,] 'All this — the horses, the *corrida*, too — those things are dying. All you will see there on that road will be the machines — those new automobiles like the one Robles has, you know?'"

"Where will the cowboys be, Tata?" I asked him, puzzled. "They will be ghosts. Dead."

Barreplata was right. The machines did come, in greater and greater numbers. But even as more range land gave way to urban development, neither cowboys nor ranching ever went away in Arizona. The Sierra Bonita Ranch, in Southeastern Arizona's Sulphur Springs Valley, is now in its sixth generation of family ownership and still in operation after nearly 150 years, while the Empire Ranch, near Sonoita, began as a homestead ranch of 160 acres in the 1860s and grew to more than 100,000 acres and 50,000 head of cattle.

On Indian land and in towns and cities around the state,

Arizona's rodeo tradition remains strong two decades into the new century. Payson's rodeo began in 1884 and is considered the world's oldest continuous rodeo. The *charreada*, a rodeo variation that grew out of the ranching culture of Spain and Mexico, endures, too.

With competitors decked out in their *charro* outfits, the *charreada* is sport, art and cultural ritual. During the *escaramuza*, an all-women event, teams of eight competitors perform synchronized moves to *folklórico* music while riding sidesaddle in the ring. As the horses spin, turn and gallop in an equestrian ballet, the riders' richly colored embroidered dresses — a tribute to the female soldiers who fought in the Mexican Revolution — swirl with the movement, like a vision come to life of that fiesta day Wilbur-Cruce recalled from so long ago.

BUT NOTHING STAYS THE SAME. By the late 1980s, the Wilbur-Cruce herd's days on the range were numbered. After Eva Antonia Wilbur-Cruce decided to sell the ranch, The Nature Conservancy purchased the property with plans to transfer it to the federal government as an addition to Buenos Aires National Wildlife Refuge. Despite their long history on the land, the horses

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were considered incompatible with efforts to reintroduce the masked bobwhite, an endangered quail species, and were slated for relocation from their home of more than a century.

Wildlife biologist Steve Dobrott and his wife, Janie, traveled to the ranch to inventory the horses. Not long after finishing the fieldwork, Steve read *A Beautiful, Cruel Country* and speculated that the horses the couple observed on the ranch might indeed be the Spanish Barbs that Wilbur-Cruce described. He contacted Marye Ann Thompson, a breeder of Spanish mustangs, who then brought in Dr. Philip Sponenberg, now a professor of pathology and genetics at the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, to evaluate the population.

Because of an ongoing drought, the herd was easy to find, clustered along a creek where mountain lions easily



picked off the foals. After observing the herd, Sponenberg wrote, “The horses looked as if they’d walked right out of the past — 14 to 15 hands high, and in every shade of black, chestnut, bay, gray and paint.”

Despite their historical significance, the horses faced an uncertain future once removed from the ranch. The herd could have ended up dispersed in auctions — thus diluting their rare bloodline — or, far worse, been sent to slaughterhouses. Wilbur-Cruce decided to donate the horses to the American Minor Breeds Conservancy (now known as the Livestock Conservancy), an organization dedicated to preserving heritage livestock breeds. The conservancy sorted the animals into breeding groups as part of a program designed to preserve the strain, and Wilbur-Cruce, by then 87 and in a wheelchair, watched as the herd left the ranch.

Dr. Gus Cothran, now a professor emeritus at the Texas A&M College of Veterinary Medicine and Biomedical Sciences, performed a blood typing analysis that provided the scientific corroboration of the herd’s heritage; he later confirmed his conclusions with DNA testing as that technology advanced. He observed, “These horses, based upon the analysis I have just done, are probably the best or near-best representative of the old Spanish type that was brought to the New World. ... These horses are like a genetic time capsule.” Sponenberg later declared that the Wilbur-Cruce herd represented “a most significant discovery of a horse thought to be gone forever.”

Although the line has been saved, it’s bittersweet to think that the horses no longer live where they had for generations. “That would have been the best-case scenario, if they could have stayed there and remained with nature

selecting them and in the environment in which they were adapted to,” Janie Dobrott says. “But, as I’m sure you’re aware, the federal government is not real happy to have to deal with wild horses.”

The Dobrotts were among those who took ownership of Wilbur-Cruce horses as part of the breeding program. Janie was taken with the horses’ compact strength thanks to bone size, even at their typical weight of 700 to 900 pounds, that rivals that of 1,200-pound quarter horses. “They have the same bone size, but they’re just much shorter,” she says. “And they make such good partners. They’re sensible. A lot of today’s breeds, because people have been making decisions about what gets bred, have become more excitable, more reactive. These horses are not like that, for the most part. They’re different to work with and easier to train. They bond with you.”

While there are nearly 200 Wilbur-Cruce horses, the line is still considered “critically rare.” These days, other wild horses, if not genetically pure stock like the Wilbur-Cruce horses, are by no means scarce in Arizona and raise vexing humanitarian and environmental questions.

The mustangs powerfully symbolize the wildness of the country’s frontier past and a spirit of independence that many Arizonans cherish. But as their numbers have grown, the horses find themselves competing with both wildlife and livestock for scarce resources, raising the ire of hunters and ranchers alike. As many as 50,000 horses range freely across the Navajo Nation, and the tribe faces difficult and costly management decisions about how to control the population, from sterilization to culling the herds by hunting or selling the animals to foreign slaughterhouses.

Many Arizonans love seeing the majestic Salt River horses in the Tonto National Forest northeast of Phoenix, but biologists worry that the animals are destroying vital riparian habitat for migratory birds and other wildlife. And clearly, not everyone loves wild horses: Early last year, 15 animals in two family groups of the Heber herd were

As many as 50,000 horses range freely across the Navajo Nation, and the tribe faces difficult and costly management decisions about how to control the population.

shot and killed on the Mogollon Rim in the Apache-Sitgreaves National Forests.

While the Heber horses’ ancestry has never been conclusively proved, near Kingman in the Cerbat Mountains, there’s a herd that’s considered the purest of the Spanish Barbs still living freely in Arizona. In one of the state’s two designated wild horse areas managed by the Bureau of Land Management, the herd has lived largely isolated from other horses since 1862. Like its Wilbur-Cruce brethren in Southern Arizona, the Cerbat herd has survived the unique challenges of its range, including a wide temperature variance and times of sparse rainfall.

During a drought in 1971, ranchers shot members of the herd, believing the animals had depleted scarce water supplies needed by cattle. A number of the horses were subsequently captured and used as a breeding herd to preserve the line. But nearly 20 years later, a surviving group of wild Cerbat horses was found in the mountains, living as they always had. Today, there are an estimated 70 horses in the Cербats. It’s not an easy life, but it is the life they were born to, in the Arizona mountains where their ancestors ran freely for centuries before them. Just imagine the stories these horses could tell. [AH](#)



Antonie Cunningham moves the ranch remuda across Schoolhouse Pasture during fall works on Apache County’s X Diamond Ranch. SCOTT BAXTER



IT'S TIME YOU GET TO KNOW JACK

For nearly four decades, Jack Dykinga's byline has accompanied some of the best photographs this magazine has ever published. He's won every award there is to win, including a Pulitzer, but the man behind the camera is not a prima donna. He knows he's good, but he also knows that great photography is not automatic.

It takes curiosity, patience and tenacity. And no one masters those things better than Jack.

BY MATT JAFFE

JACK DYKINGA scared the hell out of me.

I grew up in a three-newspaper household in a four-newspaper town. Maybe I didn't pay quite as much attention to bylines as to box scores, but journalists were my heroes, right up there with ballplayers. Mornings began with the *Chicago Sun-Times* — tabloid in design but no gossip rag, the crusading alternative to the staid *Chicago Tribune* of Gothic Michigan Avenue headquarters grandeur and "Dewey Defeats Truman" infamy.

On a Sunday in July 1970, I went straight to the back page for the sports headlines, only to see that the Cubs and White Sox had both lost, before flipping the paper over to the news section. That's when I saw Jack's black-and-white photos from a pair of psychiatric facilities. The pictures, the critical component of a five-part investigative series, graphically revealed living conditions akin to something out of a 19th century asylum.

The misery is overwhelming. Unclothed residents stare vacantly from hard benches while another curls

Jack Dykinga is a native of (and former award-winning photojournalist in) the Chicago area, but the Southwest has been his greatest muse since he relocated to Tucson in 1976.

JOEL GRIMES

up on a bare mattress in a row of crib-like beds that fill a dormitory hall. One young man, grimacing, covers his eyes and grabs at his head. Another sprawls on a bare floor while janitors wielding their brooms stand in the background, impassive and ignoring the horrors before them.

Jack's images went directly into my 10-year-old brain's closet of nightmares, right up there with *The Birds*, *Lord of the Flies* and a mass murder a few blocks from my South Side house. But in 1971, when Jack won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for those images, it was a matter of civic pride that a Chicago guy had taken home the award.

Today, those black-and-white photos are not the images most people associate with Jack, a longtime *Arizona Highways* contributor renowned for his Sonoran Desert and Colorado Plateau shooting. Photographer and author John Shaw, one of many to sing his praises, describes Jack as "the best color landscape photographer that I've ever seen. Ever. I've never seen images like his from anyone else that are as powerful and well composed and put together."

Based in Tucson since 1976, Jack has brought the splendors of the Southwest to a worldwide audience that might previously have dismissed this arid country as lifeless wasteland.

"You don't get a sense of barren or desolate places," says Rebecca A. Senf, chief curator at the Center for Creative Photography at the University of Arizona and author of *Making a Photographer: The Early Work of Ansel Adams*. "I think of the Ansel Adams pictures of Death Valley. He was really playing up those qualities of barrenness and desolation and isolation to create a sense of drama. Whereas Jack Dykinga's drama is much more subtle, and it's coming from a much more emotional place.

"He creates that drama with light and color and abundance and strong compositional shapes, filling the frame with a sweeping arm of a closely framed saguaro. I think of these full, rounded shapes of brittlebush plants: beautiful, loping yellow globes in the landscape. Or a pattern of tumbling pieces of petrified wood that are contrasting against mud hillsides, or curving sandstone formations in all of these shades of orange and red. There's a real sensuousness about the way he treats the landscape."

I came West after college and began seeing Jack's photography: gorgeous shots of Baja California boojums twisting against magenta skies, close-ups of agaves and barrel cactuses and saguaros, almost abstract yet so precise in detail that I thought touching the spines in the photos could draw blood. His is a remarkable body of work: ugliness and beauty, humanity at its worst and nature at its most magnificent.

Tucson writer and environmental advocate Bill Broyles is a longtime friend of Jack's, and the two have spent many nights around campfires while exploring Arizona and Mexico. He marvels at the sweep of Jack's career. "Jack is able to take a particular plant or boulder or cliff or water spring and make that place the most beautiful, or the most rugged, or the most enticing, or the most revealing place in the world," Broyles says. "Yet he can shoot the entire view across the Grand Canyon, with the colors, layers, and the clouds and the lightning,

Vibrant layers of sandstone cradle a mirror-like pool of water in Northern Arizona's Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness.

JACK DYKINGA

and make that your place, too.

"His photography has evolved from black-and-white street shots in Chicago, and then he came out here and was photo editor at the newspaper before deciding he wanted to be a Colorado River rafting guy. ... How do you go from street shots to large-format color? It takes an incredibly adventurous spirit to make that work."

To Jack, though, those pictures are not as different as they appear to be. "They're all decisive moments; it's just that some moments are farther apart," he says. "That's where the patience comes in, and it's also where the knowledge of your subject comes in. And both of those qualities are journalistic."

JACK OPENS THE DOOR to his home, an early-2000s, red-tiled roof house below Pusch Ridge with a patch of undeveloped desert just beyond the backyard wall. He's taller than I expected, a fit 78, with an open face shadowed by a tightly cropped beard. What remains of his hair is cut close along the prominent dome of his head. Jack seems like an unlikely source of childhood nightmares, and now we're just a couple of Chicago guys sitting around, talking about Chicago.

Jack grew up in the leafy western suburb of Riverside, somewhere on the other side of the metropolitan universe from my neighborhood near the steel mills and the Indiana state line. Riverside gets its name from a setting by the banks of the Des Plaines River. No cookie-cutter suburb, the town was planned in the mid-1800s by famed landscape architects Frederick Law Olmsted and Calvert Vaux, and its park-like atmosphere, blending urban and natural features, earned the suburb a spot on the National Register of Historic Places.

The son of a railroad worker and a telephone operator, Jack was raised in a bungalow 300 feet from the train tracks. But there was beauty in town and nature nearby, as well as, quite literally, lions and tigers and bears at the world-famous Brookfield Zoo, just a few miles away. Jack looked out from his high school to the trees of a forest preserve and searched quarries for fossils. A June 1954 photo in the *Tribune* shows an 11-year-old Jack and two friends fishing from a nearly horizontal tree limb suspended a few feet over the Des Plaines. Jack's feet dangle in the water, a glimpse of the bygone days of free-range childhoods.

"All of that was huge," he says. "By the time I was born, my parents were both in their 40s, and they were not as doting. I could wander pretty freely, and back then, there were prairies in western suburbs where I would collect garden spiders and snakes. I was able to go out and be curious. It sort of perked my interest in wild places."

Although Jack's boyhood seems idyllic, he faced a hidden challenge. Long before it was commonly diagnosed, he strug-



This arresting photo, made in 1970, was part of Jack's contribution to a *Chicago Sun-Times* investigation of living conditions at two psychiatric facilities in Illinois. The photos and accompanying story stirred public outrage that forced the state to increase mental health funding. The following year, Jack won the Pulitzer Prize for Feature Photography for his images.



gled with dyslexia. Reading proved difficult, and he graduated in the bottom quarter of his class. But Dick, Don and Ernie, his three older brothers, taught him how to use a 35 mm camera. For a struggling student, photography proved to be a lifeline.

Jack learned processing and printmaking at his high school newspaper. Working nights as a freight house worker with a predominantly Black crew, he unloaded rolls of carpet from boxcars, expanding his outlook beyond the sheltered suburbs. He socked away enough money to buy a Nikon, and then, a picture he shot of a football game won first place in a national competition sponsored by *Look* magazine.

Jack caught a break after graduation when the owners of the camera shop where he was spending all of his pay helped arrange his first professional job. It was as an assistant to photographer Mike Rotunno, one of those only-in-Chicago characters straight out of a David Mamet fever dream. After shooting for local newspapers, in 1927, Rotunno established Metro News at Midway, where he specialized in getting photos of anyone who was anyone arriving at Midway Airport: Hollywood stars (Marilyn Monroe and John Wayne), politicians (every president from Calvin Coolidge to Richard Nixon), world luminaries (Cardinal Eugenio Pacelli, who later became Pope Pius XII). Al Capone reportedly took a dive when a Speed Graphic flash startled him, and Rotunno used to hang out with Harry Truman over ice cream sundaes and even attended the 33rd president's 80th birthday party.

Jack bagged his share of celebrities, too, from Nixon to the Beatles, and broke the news to deplaning singer Andy Williams that President John F. Kennedy had been assassinated. Delivering prints introduced him to newspaper photo staffs, and, after applying for a *Tribune* lab job, a 20-year-old Jack got hired as a staff photographer.

He entered a newsroom still rooted in the classic Chicago newspaper world celebrated in *The Front Page*, joining pho-

tographers who, in their long coats and fedoras, resembled a casting call for a dinner-theater production of *Guys and Dolls*. "When you got an assignment, this gruff guy named Krause would come back and say, 'Hat and coat!'" Jack recalls. "And that was it. That was your prepping for assignments."

Rich Cahan worked as *Sun-Times* picture editor from 1983 to 1996 and now, along with his partners at CityFiles Press, edits and publishes photographic histories of Chicago. He says Jack helped bring a new professionalism to Chicago photojournalism.

"There was an era of people who started as copy boys and copy clerks, then became photographers," Cahan says. "I'm talking about the '30s, '40s and '50s. Because [to be a photojournalist], you were really a good driver, you were extroverted, and you knew how to work with people. Photography was not as important as those skills. Your job was to get someplace and literally take a picture. You had an assignment, and you checked it off, and you were done. My sense of Jack is that he had a real sense of quality and purpose — that he came from a different background, where photography was art and photography was journalism. The image was really important. And not just the image, but what the image said."

Jack confronted the entrenched attitudes of an earlier time. The *Tribune* required its lensmen to use medium- or large-format cameras, but Jack preferred his faster, less obtrusive 35 mm. Even after his 35 mm pictures earned front-page play, Jack clashed with management before joining the *Sun-Times* in 1965, as Chicago photojournalism moved into a golden era.

"The newspaper world is the world's best taskmaster, especially Chicago during that period, with four competing newspapers — I mean, you know how competitive it was," Jack says. "That sense of competition was there every day you went out on assignment. You were in a photo contest; you were competing against three other really talented people. Some of them were exceptionally talented, and some of them cleaned my clock.

After a while, you know, I became a clock cleaner myself. But when I first started, like anybody, I was terrified. Then you grow into the business."

In a picture of the *Sun-Times*' staff, Jack points out photographer Louis Giampa. Much later in Jack's career, he found out from Giampa's brother that Giampa was a made man in the Chicago mob. "He was very powerful," says Jack. "As a young photographer, I'd be photographing hoods, and one time, this guy tried to kick me. Louie was there, and he said, 'Hey! Stand up and let him take your picture.'"

In addition to mob activities, Chicago was on the front lines of the domestic discord of the 1960s, both generationally and racially. Like many people his age, Jack had a political awakening and moved away from his more conservative upbringing. He photographed the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr.'s march on Cicero, where he had the film ripped out of his camera, and went down to the South Side to help repair houses burned in an arson attack. At one rally, Jack's reporter colleague began lecturing the segregationist mob. "He's got a pad and pencil, and I'm there with cameras all over me when they yell, 'Get the press!'" Jack recalls. "Of course, they don't go for the guy with the pad; they go for the guy with the cameras. I had to become a sprinter for the next couple of blocks."

Jack missed the infamous street clashes during the 1968 Democratic National Convention because he had presidential-level security clearance and was marooned inside the International Amphitheatre. "I was welded to Hubert Humphrey," he says. "All of my friends were out in the streets, doing all of the fun stuff. Those were electric times."

In 1970, Ralph Frost, the *Sun-Times*' chief photographer, told Jack that reporters Jerome Watson and Sam Washington were investigating the inhumane conditions at a pair of psychiatric facilities after the families of residents had tipped off the newspaper. The families were especially desperate for coverage because the state was planning additional cuts to mental health funding. Washington managed to get a job as a custodian, and a school director, eager to expose the situation, gave Jack the access he needed.

A kid with Down syndrome served as a self-appointed guide, and Jack was overwhelmed by what he calls a "sensory onslaught": a cacophony of screaming and yelling, a mix of fetid odors, and appalling scenes of suffering that have stayed with him for a lifetime. "Then the muscle memory kicked in and I began photographing," he recalls. "It's one of the gifts of being a journalist."

In the best muckraking tradition of Chicago journalism, the series shocked the public, and the resulting outrage forced the state to actually *increase* mental health funding. Jack's photos are revelatory and horrifying, yet they have a beauty that anticipated his later work.

"Jack sometimes underplays what he accomplished," Cahan says. "It looks a bit like shooting fish in a barrel, because it all seems so outrageous. How could you *not* take a good picture? But he said it took him an hour to even figure out where he was before he regrouped, it was so bad. Then he made pictures that

are so artistically beautiful. They are extraordinary.

"Some people deserve the Pulitzer Prize more than others, and Jack absolutely did. Oh, my gosh, that he was able to portray that — such a stark, black-and-white, beautiful world — was remarkable. If you look at those pictures, they're really from someone special. I've never seen anything like them since. ... They're so simple. There are so few elements. That's what makes us able to look at them. The boldness and simplicity, and the dramatic light."

In May 1971, while in the field, Jack received a call on the two-way radio, ordering him back to the newsroom. He was angry about leaving his assignment, then was welcomed with a standing ovation. He had won the Pulitzer Prize. He was 28 years old.

ONE DAY IN 1975, high on Mount Rainier, Jack thought he was going to die.

Chuck Scott, a highly respected photo director, had lured Jack back to the *Tribune* and given him the chance to shoot more in-depth stories. One was about Harry Schlag, the middle-aged owner of a suburban camping store, who planned to climb the 14,411-foot stratovolcano in Washington state. Along with Schlag, Jack traveled to the Cascades with pal Bill Bendt. "We were a couple of kids from Chicago trying to do this mountain and thought we were in good shape by running around the block a couple of times," Jack recalls. "We had no idea."

The group attended mountaineering school and practiced for a few days prior to summiting. Schlag concluded he wasn't up to it, but Jack and Bendt pushed on. The effort was exhausting and exhilarating — and, as Jack wrote in his book *A Photographer's Life*, he never felt so alive as when "we punched through the cloud layer bathed in the crimson light."

Then, a whiteout. The winds picked up and temperatures plunged as the jet stream slammed directly into Rainier. The group considered bivouacking in snow caves, even given the threat of avalanches, before struggling back to base camp at 10,000 feet. But their relief was brief. As the storm raged on, the guides determined that the exhausted climbers needed to continue to lower elevations.

Zero visibility has a way of bringing greater clarity. "The first thing you learn is, you learn to dig deep within yourself and trust your own abilities," Jack says. "The No. 1 thing I learned is that I could do more than I thought I could. That self-awareness was one of the products. And actually, realizing that nature doesn't give a shit about you was another one."

Returning to Chicago, Jack felt estranged at the *Tribune*, especially as Scott's initiatives began to encounter resistance from management. After Scott was fired, Jack turned down the position, and a sympathetic editor, recognizing the lingering impact of the Rainier episode, suggested that he take a leave of absence. With good friends living in Tucson, Jack and his wife, Margaret, drove south to spend a year in Arizona.

While Margaret worked on her master's degree at the University of Arizona, Jack played househusband and explored the local mountains. "It was transformational, living in Arizona,"

he says. “It was different then. On Thanksgiving, the mountains were covered with snow. The snow was thick, and all of the washes were running. It was just paradise.”

And the landscape appealed to his aesthetic sense. “The openness of the sky and the sweep of the light across the land is just, like, *whoa!*” he says. “You’re not looking through a diffuse canopy of trees; you’re seeing light transform into shapes, patterns and textures. One thing about Washington, D.C., is that the monuments are set apart. That’s what the Southwest is: The land is monumental. The sense of space and the ‘big empty.’”

The couple returned to Chicago for a year, but as Jack drove the expressways, there were no mountains to break the horizon. “It wasn’t a conscious thing; I just felt less complete there,” he recalls. The Dykingas relocated to Tucson in 1976, ending his Chicago newspaper career. “Jack was the premier photographer of his era,” Cahan says. “Maybe with Henry Herr Gill at the [Chicago] *Daily News*, he was really the most intense, serious photographer of that time.”

JACK BECAME PHOTO EDITOR at the *Arizona Daily Star* during a time when Executive Editor Bill Woestendiek had put a new emphasis on visuals. There certainly was room for improvement. Jim Kiser, who worked as an assistant city editor and later as editorial page editor, recalls Jack’s arrival: “It was a really big deal. We were all very excited for this high-powered, very capable guy to come in. He came into a photo department where one of the people was legally blind. Which is not the best of combinations. Jack changed the department.”

Tucson lacked Chicago’s newspaper-town pedigree, but Jack ran his own show. “I left Chicago as a pretty big fish in a big pond, but it’s limited,” he says. “You’re only doing this one little cubicle of work and don’t expand to see the whole picture. In Tucson, I got to do layout, I got to do design, I watched the press run. It was a really great experience, and I enjoyed that kind of later-life growth in this industry that I knew well.”

Jack upgraded the department and explored Arizona and Mexico while working on occasional larger projects. He mentored a young, talented staff but eventually bristled at demands that were placed on the department but had nothing to do with photojournalism. Five years after taking the position, he resigned. He wanted to go back to shooting while launching a wilderness-guide business.

There were legends afoot in the Arizona of that time — writers, artists and photographers. I press Jack about Edward Abbey. “We were just occasional acquaintances, but he was very kind to me,” he says. “The best compliment was when I went over to his house and he met me at the door with this huge stack of books, basically everything he wrote, and signed them over to me. I photographed him a couple of times, and we went hiking. I wouldn’t say we were dear friends, but it’s nice to have a man like that respect you. I was a fanboy, and he was clearly an icon. ... The thing that bound us together was the environment. The love for the desert.”

Back in Chicago, the work of photographer Philip Hyde —

especially Hyde’s Exhibit Format Series work for the Sierra Club, advocating for the protection of such places as the Grand Canyon — had inspired Jack. “I thought, *That’s real journalism*,” he recalls. “I didn’t look at it as landscape photography, per se. I looked at it as doing God’s work — saving those places and saving the planet.” The two became friends after a ranger introduced Jack to Hyde at Organ Pipe Cactus National Monument, where the veteran photographer was traveling with his wife, Ardis, in a little Datsun pickup. After that, they ventured out together on long trips, and Hyde became a major influence.

“A lot of photographers were going to this really gonzo color transparency film, and Phil would stick to the more traditional, like Ektachrome versus some of the Fuji,” Jack says. “He would get a more nuanced, pastel range of colors. My landscape buddies were all Young Turks saying, ‘No, no, no, we have to go with this stuff.’ And I’d say, ‘Wait a minute — there’s value in looking at what Phil’s doing.’ So he gave me some grounding — not so much ‘Stand here and do this’ advice. Instead, he modeled a moral center that I needed. I think everybody can use someone like that. He was one of the most underrated

Low clouds, snow-covered peaks and jagged icebergs define a view of Grey Lake, a glacier-fed body of water at Torres del Paine National Park in Chile.

JACK DYKINGA

photographers — if Phil had anyone hyping his work like Ansel did, he’d be right up there.”

On his first assignment for *Arizona Highways*, Jack worked with writer Charles Bowden, another Chicago emigrant. As Jack wrote in a 2019 tribute to Bowden in the *Journal of the Southwest*: “And lo and behold, up at Ramsey Canyon, I meet this abrasive, Fess Parker-looking guy. We circled each other like a couple of dogs peeing on a fire hydrant.”

They would become close friends and frequent collaborators, including on several books. Their adventures are the stuff of Southwest lore: everything from a cross-country ski journey with Arizona Governor Bruce Babbitt from Jacob Lake to the Canyon’s North Rim — before hiking from rim to rim — to a trek retracing the low-desert route of the Texas Argonauts

between Yuma and Palm Springs, entirely by night to avoid the August heat. A winter canyoneering trip into Paria Canyon helped lead to the book *Stone Canyons of the Colorado Plateau*, which spurred the establishment of Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument after the publication was given to President Bill Clinton. And, along with a group of friends that included writer Broyles and the *Daily Star*’s Doug Kreutz, Jack and Bowden climbed Mexico’s 18,500-foot Pico de Orizaba volcano.

Bowden was a spectacular chronicler of Arizona and the borderlands, the Abbey-in-waiting. Writers and photographers are both a natural pairing and a combustible mix, because the demands of their respective disciplines are so different. Among friends, Jack is famous for his methodical approach, but fortunately, Bowden was content to settle down in the shade and read for hours while Jack waited for the right moment. No Kindle for Bowden: He weighed down his pack with hardcovers, adding to physical challenges the two took on. On that Canyon ski trip, Jack remembers Bowden reading a big, fat book on the demise of the passenger pigeon.

As Jack wrote about Bowden, “He did what I do photograp





Resolute evergreens cling to the Kaibab Limestone spires of the Grand Canyon's North Rim in midmorning fog, as viewed from the North Kaibab Trail.
JACK DYKINGA

cally — he became intimate with the subject through research.” Theirs was a true friendship, blending deep affection, mutual respect and occasional exasperation. Jack tells me, “Chuck had a depth of scholarship that not many writers have, because of his background as a historian. He would come up with this stuff out of nowhere — he was the equivalent of a gym rat in the library. He was also a bit of a showboat, later on. I knew him so long, I could see the change, and some of that stuff, I didn’t like. But I don’t want to go into that too far.” His voice trails off.

JACK WAS DYING.

In 2010, he noticed his hiking abilities had declined and, fearing lung cancer, went to the doctor. Instead, he was diagnosed with idiopathic

pulmonary fibrosis. “I thought, *Great!*” he remembers. “It pays to be ignorant. Then I went home and looked things up and found out that in three years, I was supposed to be dead. I kind of envisioned that I would fade into the sunset, tapering off gently. I went through life blithely ignorant about how bad it was. Until it was.”

On a 2014 Canyon rafting trip, as a dust storm kicked up, Jack’s lungs stopped. “Suddenly, your eyes are wide open and you think, *Shit, this is it,*” he says.

It was near the end of the trip. Motoring to the takeout, Jack thought he could just go back to his hotel room and have some oxygen. Instead, he was taken to a Phoenix hospital, then to Scottsdale’s Mayo Clinic, where he was enrolled in a study for a new drug. But his lungs didn’t respond after a week of

aggressive intervention. “At the end of the week,” he recalls, “they had done all that they could and said there were two options: die, or get a transplant.”

Jack was transferred to the Norton Thoracic Institute, at St. Joseph’s Hospital and Medical Center in Phoenix, for a double lung transplant and double heart bypass. The recovery was long, and Jack says Margaret was “a saint” as he battled back. Bowden was there, too, once bursting into Jack’s room without a mask or gloves. He stayed in touch with emails repeating the refrain “Johnny Cash advises lay off the whiskey and let the cocaine go,” while also proffering his lowercase wisdom:

“all the canyons will be there when you trot out of the medical caves.”

“given my little jaunts into the world, i notice there is not a lot of fair out there. so i am glad you caught a break.”

He was right about the ways of the world. A couple of months later, it was Bowden who died, of a heart attack.

Jack had lost a close friend, and nearly his own life. But, after a year’s recovery, he returned to the field with a renewed commitment. But renewed by what? “First off is passion,” he says. “Gratitude and the chance of rebirth.

The chance to pay back the true heroics of the medical profession. They

invested all of this in you, and you better make use of that time. I think I’m going at a faster pace than I have ever gone in my life — coupled with the ability to know what’s good and be much more selective when I actually push the shutter. Yeah, it really makes you appreciate life. And, casting out more clichés, it does make you a better person. If it doesn’t, there’s something wrong with you.”

Jack has never feared change. Although he says he once was “the digital Antichrist,” he embraced digital photography once its capabilities exceeded what he could do with film. But some things were lost. “The beauty of a 4x5 view camera is the solitude,” he says. “You pull this cloth over your head, and it’s basically you and this rectangle that’s upside-down. All of those things take you out of the normal world — being upside-

down, being isolated. It’s a very Zen-like experience when you bore into that space and it becomes the canvas that you’re going to paint on. That, I miss. A camera now is a computer, and it’s going to go as fast as you can. But your task, should you choose to accept it, is to go slow.”

So, Jack slows down. He scouts and he waits, he leaves and he comes back, and he’s forever looking. Shaw, the writer and photographer, says one of his enduring memories is driving behind Jack and watching him swerve all over the road as his head swiveled from side to side, searching for scenes to photograph. In his Chevrolet Silverado with its solar panel, Jack can live off the grid, putting himself in position for those decisive moments, however far apart they turn out to be. As another friend, Spanish photographer Daniel Beltrá, puts it: “When the first rains arrive, he needs to be there. He’s very passionate about that, because the normal view of the desert is so harsh. Jack reveals the beauty that is hidden beneath the surface, that most people never get to see. He’s very attentive to be able to show those bursts of life.”

Or, as Jack puts it: “Because of the ephemeral nature of the light and the seasons and everything else, the hard part is the planning — just getting your body to that place at the right time. Then the serendipity can come in and knock your head off.”

Jack’s decades of shooting have given him an unparalleled intimacy with the land. His journalistic instincts still motivate him to tell stories, and these days, he’s rephotographing places to document how climate change has devastated the Sonoran Desert, leaving acres of flattened prickly pears and saguaros to die slow deaths over 10 years. He’s no dispassionate observer. Another good friend, Mexico City-based artist and conservationist Patricio Robles Gil, recalls a time when the two were out shooting.

“We were photographing giant saguaros, and there was a special one he wanted to show me,” Gil says. “Suddenly, he stopped and said, ‘It should be around here.’ Then he found the saguaro. It was on the ground — maybe a strong wind put it down — and he was crying. It was a very, very touching moment. You realize the kind of individual you have as a friend. I’m privileged to have his friendship.”

After meeting in Tucson, Jack and I stay in contact. While in Illinois, visiting family, he sends pictures of his grandson Nic playing baseball, and I email that old picture of Jack and his friends fishing. He makes a correction: “Btw, how the hell did you find that? I think the caption is wrong and I’m the chunky kid on the left.”

On a Sunday afternoon, I catch up with Jack as he drives west on Ina Road to photograph a family of burrowing owls. He’s positively joyful.

“Let me say the really important thing, Matt,” he says. “There are now five chicks in this burrow. They’ve been out for two days. Burrowing owls are 6 inches tall, but they punch way above their weight and think they’re eagles. They have a lot of attitude, and I have a special affinity for this group. This is the counterpoint to all the ugly stuff in life. You have to have that for yourself. It’s a refuge for the soul.” **AH**



SOME IMPORTANT DATES IN HISTORY

Date trees were imported to the Salt River Valley in 1890. About 30 years later, in 1919, an unusual seedling was found in a Phoenix neighborhood. The mysterious variety became known as the Black Sphinx, which is considered the “Cadillac of dates.” Although date farming peaked in Phoenix in the 1940s, the state has become the epicenter for the production of Medjool dates, and Arizona State University is home to one of the nation’s premier repositories for rare date palms. BY MATT JAFFE

HERE’S AN OASIS ON THE EDGE OF TOWN, not far from the point where Loop 202 reaches its eastern apogee and starts orbiting back to Phoenix. Edged by hardscrabble vacant lots more barren than the barest of desert, and parking lots dusted by swirling sand, this oasis on a scruffy section of the Arizona State University Polytechnic campus in Mesa is a landmark in the world of American date farming.

At first, you might wonder whether the stand of palms established itself at the site of a remnant desert spring. But then you notice that the trees are arranged in rows. This is ASU’s Date Palm Germplasm, one of the top two living repositories of rare date palms in the United States. More than 50 kinds of dates — with names such as Barhi, Halawi, Zahidi and Bentamoda, recalling these palms’ ancient Middle Eastern and North African origins — grow at the germplasm, a genetic bank to preserve varieties that might otherwise be lost forever. Among them is the Maresco, a locally sourced date of unknown parentage.

“There are a lot of things here that, if they disappeared from this collection, you’d be hard-pressed to find anywhere else in the country,” says Scott Frische, curator of horticulture at the Phoenix Zoo. He also tends his own 2-acre date palm grove on the lower eastern slopes of the White Tank Mountains, west of Phoenix. “I’m a Saturday farmer,” he says. Frische is here with Deborah Thirkhill, germplasm manager and arboretum program coordinator at ASU, and Elaine Joyal, an ethnobotanist collaborating with them on a book about dates in the Salt and Gila river valleys.

While date palms can reach 80 feet, the germplasm’s trees are more squat than stately, with fronds longer than the trunks are tall. These younger trees were planted when the germplasm moved after the 2002 sale of its previous ASU location. The university’s collection, which includes Medjool date palms along historic Palm Walk, is the country’s largest public date garden. After the importation of date shoots to the Phoenix area in 1890, Tempe became an early center for the industry and home to a pair of research stations. And for years, graduating classes have planted date palms on campus as a gift to the university.

Date palms await harvesting on a farm in Yuma, which today is the center of date production in Arizona. At this stage, the dates are bagged to protect them from birds and rain while they ripen. GETTY IMAGES

Considering that the botanical name for date palms is *Phoenix dactylifera*, it's only appropriate that the Salt River Valley has a long history of date production, connecting the region to an agricultural tradition that goes back 6,000 years or more. Not that dates have ever been a simple fruit to grow.

For one thing, there are both male and female date palms, and with two sexes come the kinds of complications you might expect. Only females produce fruit, which means it makes no sense to raise a bunch of males — especially because one male produces enough pollen for 40 to 50 female palms. But bees often deliver that pollen to the hive, not to female palms. Wind can distribute pollen, but for commercial cultivation, you can't leave the process to chance. So, male flower stems are removed from the palms, then dried and shaken to extract the pollen as a fine powder. After that, the females are pollinated by hand with tools that include condiment bottles, modified leaf blowers and cannons. It can take four tries, because palm flowers don't all bloom at the same time.

Frische reaches up with a pole saw to sever the flower stalk from a male tree. He's had a fascination with dates since the day in 1962 when his father, an engineer originally from New York, noticed a short newspaper article advising homeowners that they could grow date palms of their own. Frische still has the clip.

The family lived north of Phoenix, so it was more than an hour's drive to a little farm in Mesa where a farmer sold palms. Frische remembers seeing a line of date palms, some of which had sprouted offshoots from their trunks. Rather than grow palms as seedlings, it's easier and faster to replant the offshoots, which are clones of the parent. "The farmer had built a little wooden box around the base of the offshoots, so he could backfill soil against them," Frische recalls. "It was almost an intuitive thing for me, and I sort of instantly understood he hoped to root those offshoots so he could cut them and have more palms. And that struck me as something that was very, very important."

Frische's father wanted a Medjool, but the farmer wouldn't sell him one, instead suggesting a Khadrawy, an appealing Iraqi variety known for its caramel-like flavor. The farmer later sent a worker to the Frische property to dig a hole, then arrived in another few days with the shoot and some sand for fill. "It was quite a fascinating procedure to me as a little kid," Frische says.

In a few years, the Khadrawy produced fruit, even though the tree was so small that the pendants of fruit touched the ground. Each year, the harvest got better as the tree grew tall enough that Frische's father started using a step stool or small ladder to reach the fruit.

Frische now has 59 producing palms in 30 varieties, along with a nursery where he raises trees for offshoots. His fascination endures, even if it's tempered by the realities of date farming. He says it's constant work to clean them, preen them, and cut and care for shoots, which are

susceptible to rapid dehydration once removed from the mother tree. "They're a nightmare to maintain," he says. "The nature of the date palm is to become a multi-headed beast. And a hostile one, at that."

A LONG SCOTTSDALE ROAD, in an old ranch building with a shaded porch and bright yellow door, is Sphinx Date Co. Palm & Pantry, which traces its origins to a store that opened in 1951 at the Sphinx Date Ranch in Phoenix's Arcadia neighborhood. Now owned and operated by the mother-daughter team of Sharyn and Rebecca Seitz, the pantry, which specializes in locally sourced foods (including date salsa), is a link to an era when such stands as the Shalimar Date Gardens and Hi-Jolly Dates were popular destinations in and around Scottsdale. It's also where you can find the most legendary of Phoenix dates: the Black Sphinx.

The Black Sphinx has multiple competing origin stories, but one is contained in a PDF that Frische calls the "Hilgeman document," a history of Arizona date growing researched in the 1970s by Robert H. Hilgeman of the University of Arizona Citrus Branch Experiment Station in Tempe. According to the document, in 1919, Robert Metzler, a partner in the Phoenix Date Co., discovered an unusual seedling in a Phoenix yard, then replanted it at the company's gardens, along with 10 offshoots. The palms ended up producing an especially delicate and delicious date: small, rich and creamy, but also prone to rapid spoilage. Tapping into the exotic allure of dates, and perhaps caught up in the mania for all things Egypt following the 1922 discovery of King Tut's tomb, the company's owner, Frank Brophy, dubbed this mysterious variety the Black Sphinx, then renamed his operation the Sphinx Date Co.

Valley of the Sun date farming peaked at about 400 acres in the 1940s, when the fruit became a popular sugar and candy substitute because of rationing during World War II. As postwar Phoenix boomed, local date production steeply declined. A major rainstorm in the early 1950s damaged a large portion of the date crop, and the demand for housing led date farmers to conclude that it was more profitable to grow subdivisions than Sukkary dates.

Yet the Sphinx Date Ranch survived, albeit in a hybrid form. Around 1953, real estate classifieds began to tout Mountgrove, a new "nature-blessed" neighborhood along Lafayette Boulevard south of Camelback Road "in a setting of date palm trees and citrus." A two-bedroom ranch home with a shake shingle roof, mahogany cabinetry and a fireplace would set you back \$12,700. As that price point would suggest, much has changed since then. But Black Sphinx date palms, all directly descended from that lone seedling discovered a century ago, still grow, casting long shadows across gardens and creating a skyline of soaring trunks and rustling fronds above Mountgrove.

"It's kind of a special place; I have an emotional attach-



Mick Dalrymple and his daughter, Katie, hold a bag of ripe dates during a harvest at the Date Palm Germplasm on the Arizona State University Polytechnic campus in Mesa.
DEANNA DENT/ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY

ment to it," Frische says. "I didn't know the area existed until probably the 1980s. But I thought, *Yeah, this is the way it's supposed to be.* They were pretty intent on keeping as much of that date garden as possible for the effect. For the exotic effect and romance. You're whisked away to a different land right there in the Arcadia district when you see a mature date garden like that."

During the 1980s, Tempe resident Harry Polk worked out a deal with many Mountgrove homeowners: He would maintain their trees, including taking care of pollination, and harvest the fruit. In exchange, the residents would get either cash or about 15 pounds of dates. The trees could

bear up to 200 pounds of fruit, so Polk kept the rest for his company, Arizona Date Gardens, which sold to the Sphinx Date Co. store and other outlets.

Rejean Durette grew up on a cattle and grain farm 100 miles north of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. He disc-jockeyed in Canada before moving to Arizona, where he hoped to score a job at a major-market station. He found some radio work in the state and eventually started a certified organic sprout business and an organic produce co-op while living in Sedona. Through his produce business, he got to know Polk and occasionally offered to buy the date business before Polk finally sold in 2013.

Durette uses a 35-foot lift he tows behind his truck to reach the crowns of the trees, which are 40 to 50 feet tall. In his first year working Mountgrove, he harvested about 10,000 pounds of dates, although he's since cut back on the number of trees he maintains. Not that selling Black Sphinx dates is a problem. In addition to local sales, he ships dates all over the country, from Hawaii to New York, via his website, azdates.com. Most buyers are repeat customers who became passionate converts after tasting

the variety. “Once they try them,” he says, “their response is, ‘Oh, my God, I had no idea that dates could be like this. How is it possible?’”

Occasionally, he bumps up against skeptics, such as at a Whole Foods where a new produce manager initially rebuffed Durette’s Black Sphinx pitch. “Then, one of the produce department workers came over,” Durette recalls. “He said to the manager, ‘You don’t understand what’s going on here. These dates are just amazing. People come in the store a month before they’re harvested and start asking, ‘Are those dates coming soon? Have you ordered them? When are you going to get them?’ These are the Cadillac of dates.’ So, the manager looks at me and says, ‘Well, OK, then!’”

IN A 1921 ARTICLE TITLED *In the Heart of American Dateland*, writer Guy Elliott Mitchell quoted what he described as an old Arabian proverb: “The date tree must have its head in the fire and its feet in the water.”

In most respects, the deserts of Arizona are ideal for date growing. But conditions are hardly uniform. While date palms crave water, their fruit is highly vulnerable to storms, because ripening coincides with the summer monsoon. “We get some really wicked monsoon [storms] here in Phoenix,” Durette notes, “and the stalks, which weigh 20 pounds each, can break with one good gust of wind.

And there goes 20 pounds of dates.”

By contrast, Yuma, which has emerged as the state’s center for Medjool date production, doesn’t get such intense or frequent monsoon storms. “Yuma more closely approximates the climate of the classic date-growing regions of North Africa and the Middle East,” Durette says. “Dates do not like monsoons. They appreciate the water, but if you can imagine them growing along the Nile, they would have plenty of water but less humidity. When we get monsoons, they can be detrimental to the crop if it rains and the fruit doesn’t dry out. That doesn’t happen in Yuma. Yuma gets virtually no monsoons.”

Yuma’s date heritage goes back nearly 160 years, to when seeds imported from the Middle East were planted after the Civil War. While production in Phoenix survives thanks to small operations and hobbyists, commercial date farming in Yuma has expanded rapidly since the 1990s, says Glenn C. Wright, associate professor and extension tree fruit specialist at UA’s Yuma Agricultural Center.

Wright has spent 29 years in the area and watched as date production spread across the Colorado River and into Arizona from California’s Bard Valley, where Medjools first were grown extensively in the United States. The Bard Valley was already filled with vegetable farms, so date growers began looking toward Yuma, including a

sandy upland mesa where land was available. Some doubted the mesa’s potential, but it proved to be excellent for dates. Combined, the Bard Valley and Yuma now have about 7,500 acres in Medjool production, including a 3,000-acre farm that Wright believes might be the world’s largest. And grower-owned Datepak ranks among the biggest packing houses anywhere.

There also are independent growers. On the other side of Telegraph Pass, out among the Mohawk Valley’s ocotillos, mesquites and paloverdes, Naked Dates began farming in 2007 and grows 3,000 Medjool palms in long rows that seem to stretch to the Gila Mountains. “A few people realized the potential of the Medjool because it’s larger than all other dates,” Wright says. “You know as well as I do that Americans eat with their eyes as well as their mouths. Anything bigger has got to be better.”

Like Frische and Durette, Wright emphasizes how labor-intensive date farming can be. After harvest and before pollination, the palms’ lance-like thorns, some 6 inches long, must be lopped off. Once the fruit grows, about 70 percent is removed so that the remaining dates can grow larger. Farm workers fit the bunch with a ring to spread apart the remaining dates, promoting air movement and minimizing fermentation during ripening. Workers place bags around the bunches to thwart birds, keep rain off and prevent ripe dates from falling to the ground. Then, because the individual dates don’t all ripen at the same time, workers might need three attempts to pick the entire crop.

“So, I don’t know, that’s 11 or 12 times you might have to go up and down the tree,” Wright says. “And when the tree is 30 or 40 feet tall and takes so much hand labor, that makes everything quite expensive. Much more expensive than citrus. Which is why, if you look at a pound of dates, they cost so much. But the good thing about growing dates is they’re virtually pest-free. We have no diseases of consequence or pests of consequence.”

For some Arizonans, dates are less about labor costs and profits than about cultural resonance. Because so much work is involved, Thirkhill, the ASU germplasm curator,

LEFT: Camelback Mountain forms the backdrop for a date farm at Indian School Road and 56th Street in Phoenix in the mid-1920s. McCULLOCH BROS./ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

ABOVE: The travel center and date gardens at Dateland, east of Yuma, are shown around 1960. Today, Dateland remains known for date-related delicacies, including date shakes. ARIZONA HIGHWAYS ARCHIVES



organizes volunteers to help out as the palms go through their annual cycle. The program is especially popular with the university’s many students from the Middle East — who, she says, are not shy about making suggestions: “They’ll say, ‘No, we do that differently back home.’”

After living and working for nearly 30 years in Europe, mostly in the decidedly unfriendly date climate of Scandinavia, Mazin Alswedi, a native of Baghdad, moved to Arizona about six years ago. He grew up with dates in Iraq: His grandfather operated a small commercial operation that raised Barhi dates southeast of Baghdad in Nasiriyah, where Alswedi sometimes spent four months a year and helped out at the farm.

While dates remain a novelty in the United States, Alswedi says they’re central to Iraqi culture, with palm trees depicted on coins and bank notes. Long before refrigeration, dates were a staple of the Iraqi diet, in combination with milk, yogurt and bread. Alswedi likens their prominence to rice in China or chiles in Mexico. “Dates are a must,” he says. “Each and every Middle Eastern house must have dates. It’s essential that they are on the table. We grow up with this fruit, and we love it. The dates must be there.”

Alswedi has established a farm in Laveen, in Phoenix’s southwest corner, with 350 date palms. He describes the palm as “a beautiful tree, such a generous tree” and explains the many ways date palms are used throughout their life cycle: The offshoots let you expand your farm quickly and can be sold to raise money. The fruit is eaten directly or as part of recipes, or pressed into honey. Pruned palm fronds are used for fires or fertilizer, or as a weaving material. Then, at the end of the date palm’s long life, the trunk is chopped into sections and turned into logs for homebuilding.

“There is some magic in this tree,” Alswedi says. “I don’t know what it is. If I go and walk between the palms, it just makes me feel good.” **AH**



Arizona Sake

The epitome of oxymoron might be the pairing of Arizona and sake. Yet in Holbrook, of all places, a master brewer has created a junmai ginjo that ranks as one of the best sakes ever produced outside of Japan.

MATT JAFFE

Welcome to Holbrook, the sake capital of America! Sort of. Although this Historic Route 66 and railroad town has never been known as the Hokkaido of the high desert, master brewer Atsuo Sakurai's Arizona Sake has put Holbrook on the international sake map. In 2018, his junmai ginjo won a gold medal as the best sake produced outside of Japan at Tokyo's Sake Competition, considered the most prestigious event of its kind.

All of which raises a basic question: What is a world-class sake brewer doing in Holbrook, a town far better known for petrified wood than for fermented rice?

To find the answer, fix your GPS to Odate, Japan, 6,000 miles west of Holbrook. Sakurai (pictured), a Yokohama native, was working at a sake brewery in Odate when he met his future wife, Heather. Of Navajo descent, Heather grew up in Holbrook and was teaching English in Japan when, one day, she decided to tour the sake facility. And, in a meet-cute that crossed cultures and continents, Sakurai turned out to be her guide.

By the time Heather met Sakurai, he was already a sake industry veteran, with 10 years in the business. Back in college, where he studied agriculture, he became intrigued with the sake brewing process as he and his friends sat around the dorm, sipping this rice-based beverage and talking politics. After working his way up from an assistant position, he earned the coveted designation of first-grade mas-

ter sake brewer and eventually decided to start his own brewery. "I wanted to work and be more relaxed and free," he says. "It's very boring being in someone else's business, and I wanted to do what I wanted to do, not what someone in the company told me to do. Sometimes your boss is very crazy, right?"

No argument there.

But sake brewing licenses, Sakurai says, are hard to come by in Japan, so the couple moved to the United States, where Sakurai hoped to set up shop in Seattle or Portland. But they're expensive cities, and with no family ties in the Pacific Northwest, the couple settled in Holbrook in 2014. Sakurai worried the Arizona climate might be too hot and arid for brewing sake, but he discovered Holbrook actually offered a couple of big advantages. The city draws from the Coconino Aquifer, which is known for its pure, high-quality water — an essential ingredient in premium sake. And the dry desert air greatly reduces the chance of mold forming during fermentation.

So, Holbrook it would be. "This little town, it's super Southwest but finally needs sake," Sakurai says.

If your vision of a sake brewery consists of shoji screens, soft lighting and handcrafted cypress and pine woods, think again. After initially brewing in his garage, Sakurai now operates out of a spartan structure on a dusty lot along Navajo Boulevard. The building could charitably be described as minimalist —



to call it Zen would be a stretch. But with a Super 8 motel as its closest neighbor and Dollar General, Carl's Jr. and McDonald's just to the south, Arizona Sake stands as an outpost of the independent entrepreneurial spirit along a strip of chains and franchises. "Yes, those are all very big businesses," Sakurai says with a measure of solemnity.

I stop by Arizona Sake on a breezy December day. *Run Rudolph Run* and an assortment of other holiday tunes play on the radio as the fermenting rice fills the

space with a fruity aroma that Sakurai likens to a mix of apple, pear and blueberry. Sakurai has gone local, to the extent that a sake brewer in Holbrook can, and wears a baseball cap emblazoned with a Route 66 marker. And Heather's grandparents recently moved onto tribal land, giving Sakurai a chance to experience the more traditional Navajo way of life during visits.

A bit of Navajo culture has even found its way into his sake. One day, Sakurai's father-in-law suggested creating a sake with Navajo tea, which is brewed from

greenthread, a member of the aster family that's common in Arizona and blooms in summer. Clearly not a man averse to a bit of disruption, Sakurai says, "I thought, *That's a very interesting idea. OK, I'll try it.*" He put stems in the sake, then heated and brewed it to better integrate the tea's flavor. The sprigs remain in the bottle, adding undertones of grassiness to the sake. And in the process, Sakurai managed a

feat even more unlikely than his straight-outta-Holbrook sake: He has brewed a sake with Navajo terroir.

"Navajo tea is the people's tea," he says. "That plant really represents Arizona, because it grows in the Arizona soil with Arizona sunshine and Arizona rain. So, the sake has an Arizona flavor, I think. Very earthy. It brings about Arizona memories."

HOLBROOK Arizona Sake, 1639 Navajo Boulevard, 928-241-8594, arizonasake.com