

S P E C I A L I S S U E

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**LIFE**

THE

**WILLED**  
YESTERDAY & TODAY  
**WEST**



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Red Hawk, an Oglala Sioux warrior and visionary, took part in 20 battles, among them the Little Bighorn massacre.

**THE**

# **WILD**

... as long as there are wide-open people in those wide-

bumped into quite a few, and others have caught the e

# WEST

WILL NEVER DIE

those wide-open spaces. Novelist **TONY HILLERMAN** has

caught the eye of photographer **WILLIAM ALBERT ALLARD**



**S**ome say the Old West died long ago, drowned by the 20th century flood of too many people, telephone lines, television and the rest. But we each define the Old West in our own way. Some westerners use the term to mean simply that part of yesterday they liked better than today. But to me the Old West means a certain kind of people and certain kinds of places—mostly places that are almost empty. The two tend to go together. When you find them, you find the Old West alive and well. Since anecdotes are my only ammunition, I can't prove it. But it's true.

Last night provided such an anecdote. On my cluttered desk I found a letter from a widow, 75, who lives near Deer Lodge, Mont. She had read a book of mine, had noticed mention of a Navajo "squash blossom necklace" and wrote last month to inquire if I could tell her where to find a picture of a squash blossom for a quilt she was planning. I try to answer such letters, but this one had misplaced itself. (The Old West allows one to adopt the Spanish reflexive verb form whereby a letter can assume the blame for misplacement.)

And so, partly out of embarrassment, partly to delay the hard work of starting this essay, I called her. She was back to quilting, she said, after having had a tendinitis operation in Missoula. Supposed to have another one, but driving a hundred miles through the Montana snow was a bit much. She'd wait for the thaw and pass the time by seeing if she could quilt with her good hand.

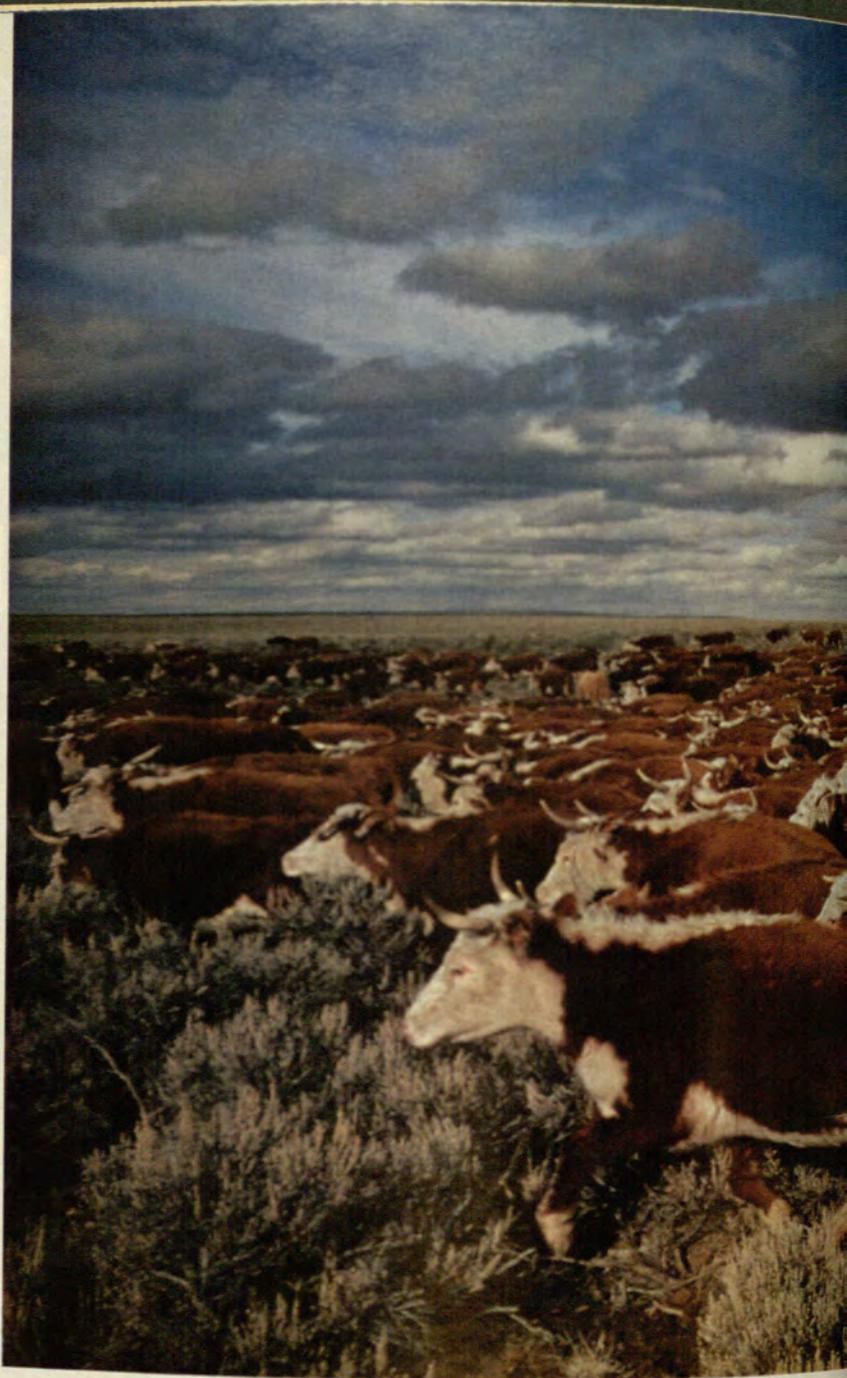
What has that to do with the survival of the Old West? Widows aged 75 live alone in eastern states and sew quilts. But would one of them write with such

## 'City people are into cremation and spreading the ashes over the

confidence to a strange novelist and answer his call with no hint of surprise? I doubt it. I think this Old West attitude toward interpersonal relations lingers where people live too far apart to get on one another's nerves and where our species is scarce enough that when we meet, we meet happily and optimistically, like country dogs with tails wagging.

Another Old Westerner who comes instantly to mind is a fellow I'll call Caldwell Tsossie, who, like the Deer Lodge widow, is partly a product of place. As the name suggests, he is a Navajo. Or, as we used to claim, an imaginary Navajo. He was farmed out as an infant to be raised by a grandmother north of the San Juan River in Utah. His birth was not recorded in Arizona or Utah, and he didn't make it onto the tribal rolls either. That complicates getting a social security number, registering to vote, etc. While this isn't a particularly odd circumstance on the Colorado Plateau, you probably wouldn't find it in Toledo or Chicago.

Nor would Tsossie's way of life be usual much beyond the east slope of the Rockies. Come summer, he works the rafts that take float-trippers down the San



Montana, 1972





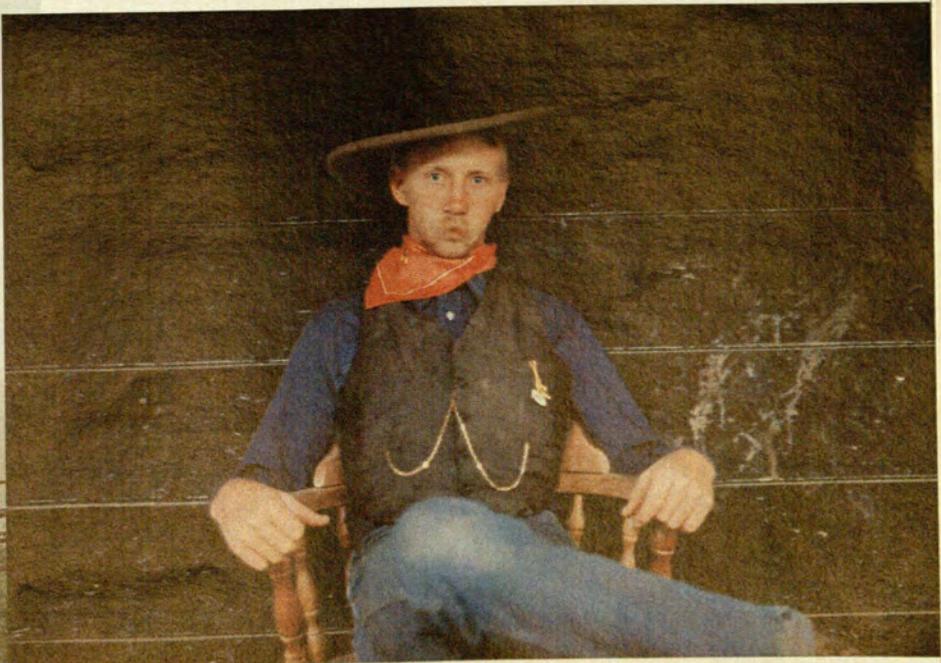
Nevada, 1971

forest. When you hear a plane, you put the lid on the sugar bowl'

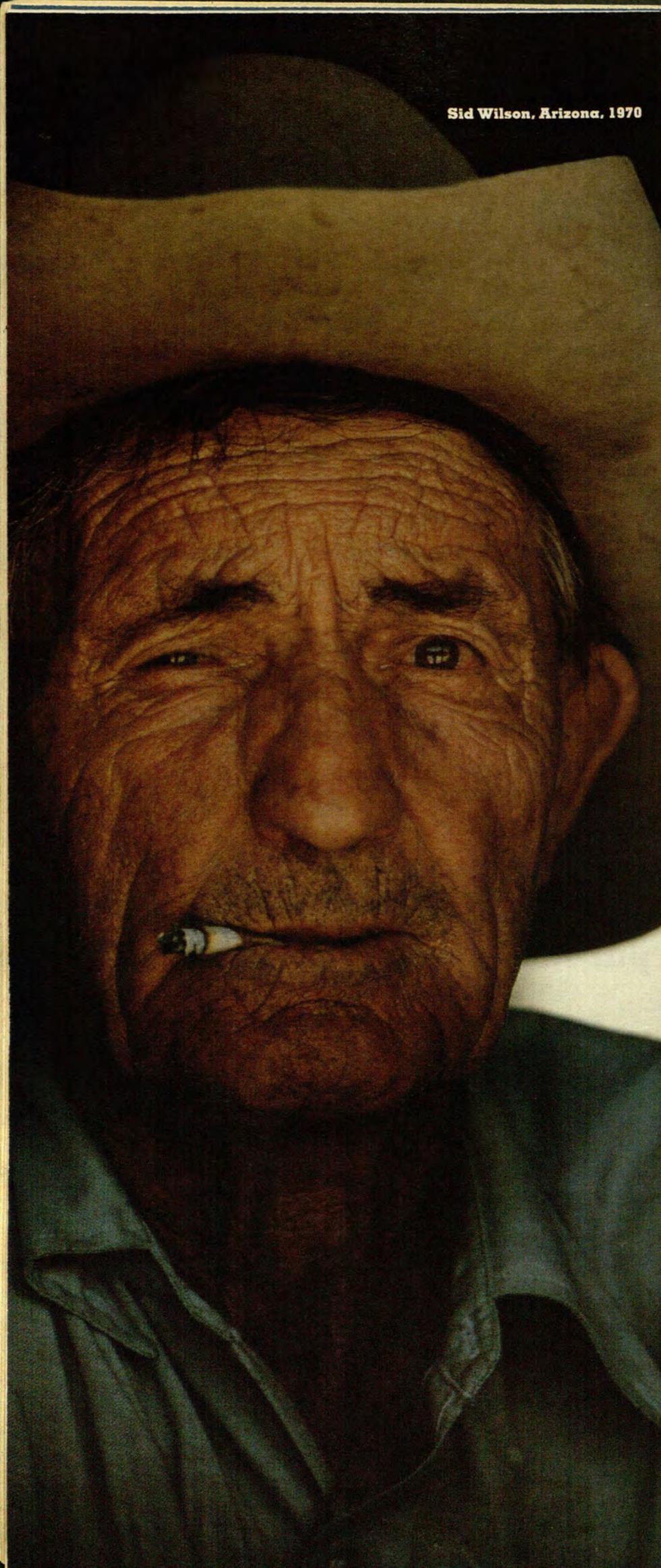
Wyoming, 1971



Hank Brackenberry, Nevada, 1979



Sid Wilson, Arizona, 1970



Juan canyon wilderness into Lake Powell. Come winter, he takes his mud-country pickup truck (equipped with generator, air tanks, etc.) out into 25,000 square miles of the Big Reservation. At sheep camps and hogans he pumps up tires, charges batteries and does whatever needs doing to get winter-killed pickups on the road again.

While Mr. Tsossie does this for a fee, performing a house-call service that the immense space and bad roads of the Old West make practical, I don't want to give the wrong impression. If you have car trouble out in the empty West, no Old Wester will pass without stopping to help. If somebody does drive by, you can with certainty accuse him of being an easterner or, worse, a New Wester.

This business of cars reminds me of another day when I knew the Old West still breathed. I had signed up to give a series of talks for the Wyoming Humanities Council—starting in Cody. A hundred or so miles short of there, the pilot of the little prop plane serving points north of Denver informed us that we had to land at Worland. The chinook was gusting at about a hundred knots in Cody. When it began blowing windows out of cars in the airport lot, the FAA shut down the runways. While we milled around in the little Worland airport trying to determine if a rental car was available, a young man walked in. Would anyone be willing to drive his car (a new Datsun 280Z) to Cody for him? A young woman said she would. The two introduced themselves (she was Debby, he was Franklin). He told her to park it at the airport and leave the keys under the floor mat.

That, I submit, was an Old West happening, unlikely to occur at Boston's Logan or New York's Kennedy or at that heart of New West, LAX. Nor would what transpired next. Debby, lovely and 23, turned to us fellow strandeers, all male and none very reliable looking, and said, "It's a two-seater. Any of you guys want a ride?"

I won. About 40 miles south of Cody we saw a solid brown wall across the horizon—the leading edge of the wind front. In a minute we were in a gale so fierce that the inevitable antelope herds of Wyoming were lying low behind any shelter they could find.

"What time you supposed to get there?" Debby asked. "If it gets bad, I may have to slow down a little."

The only other evidence I submit from this Wyoming junket is the fact that while that state is too thinly populated to offer public transportation (such as buses), it was taken for granted that I wouldn't need to rent a car. After my talk in each library, the librarian would ask for a volunteer to haul me the hundred miles or so to the next stop. The only time there was any hesitation came at Riverton. I needed to get to Laramie—221 miles away, unless blowing snow had closed the highway at Elk Mountain, requiring a detour through Medicine Bow. Lacking an immediate volunteer, the librarian reminded the audience that the Wyoming Cowboys had a home basketball game the following night. That solved the problem.

I used the term "New West" above, and frankly it describes much of the ter-

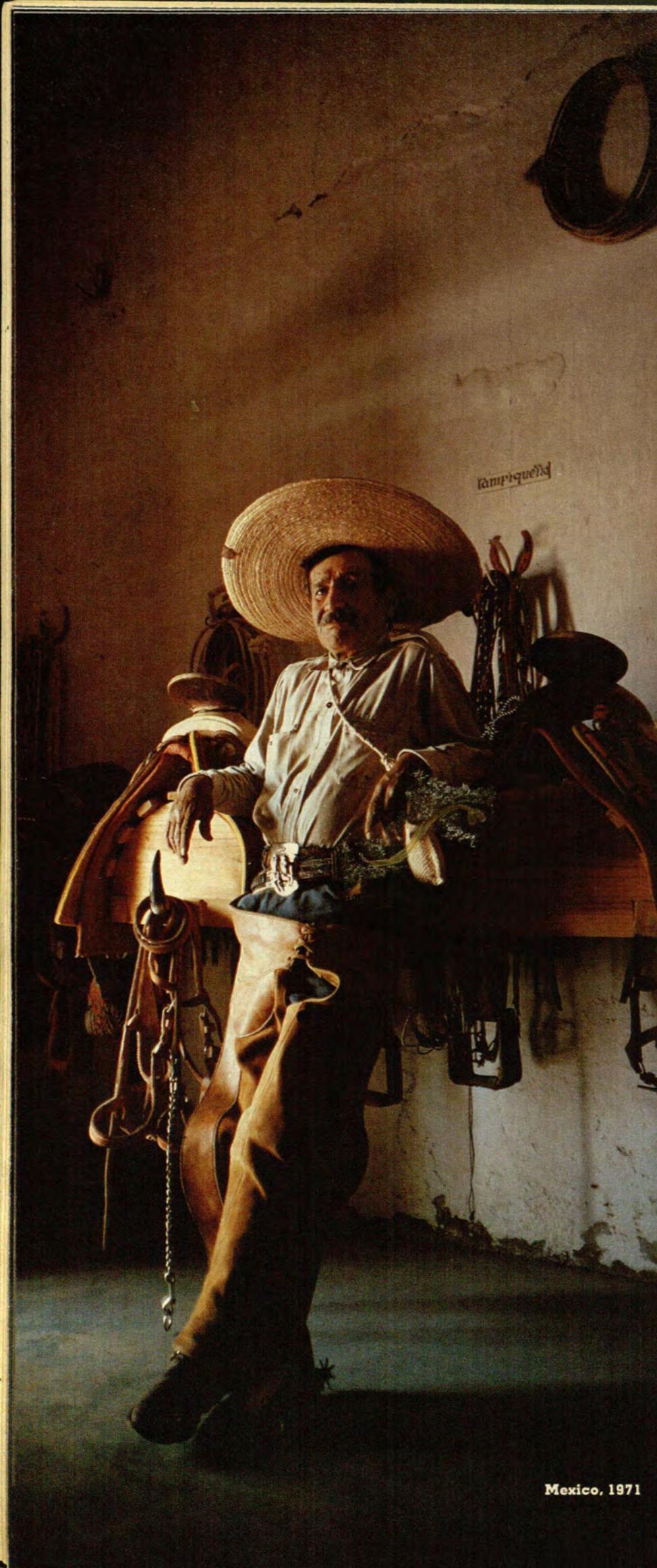
**To me the Old West means friendly people and empty places**



Montana, 1975



Stan Kendall, Nevada, 1979



Mexico, 1971

ritory west of the 100th Meridian, including 99.9 percent of California and most settlements everywhere of more than 3,000 folks. Santa Fe, for example, became irreparably New West about 1962 (the year I gave up and left). It remains a lovely place, but it has been flooded by the same folks who turned Aspen into a national demonstration of what happens when yuppies get too much money. However, even in places like Santa Fe and Aspen, a salting of Old Western types survives. One of them is an old friend named Thompson, who has been building himself an adobe house in the foothills for as long as I can remember. Urbanites who have poured in are affecting his life. "They're into cremation and spreading the ashes over the forest," he complained. "When you hear an airplane coming, you have to run in and put the lid on the sugar bowl."

Last year saw a vivid (if anecdotal) display of how the Old Westers have become a minority in Santa Fe. P.E.N., the international organization of writers with social consciousness, organized a New Mexico chapter. A meeting was held in Santa Fe. The first speakers were fairly typical of the New West, upwardly mobile newcomers with expensive educations, abundant talent and good intentions. Racial and sexual insensitivity were attacked. A woman bared her soul for us in the language of the touchy-feely movement. We heard from the New Age version of transcendentalism. All was politically correct. Then arose Max Evans, his gnarled knuckles showing why the bar fights one finds in his fiction are so knowingly described and his face proving he is a man who has dismounted many a rodeo horse earlier than intended and headfirst.

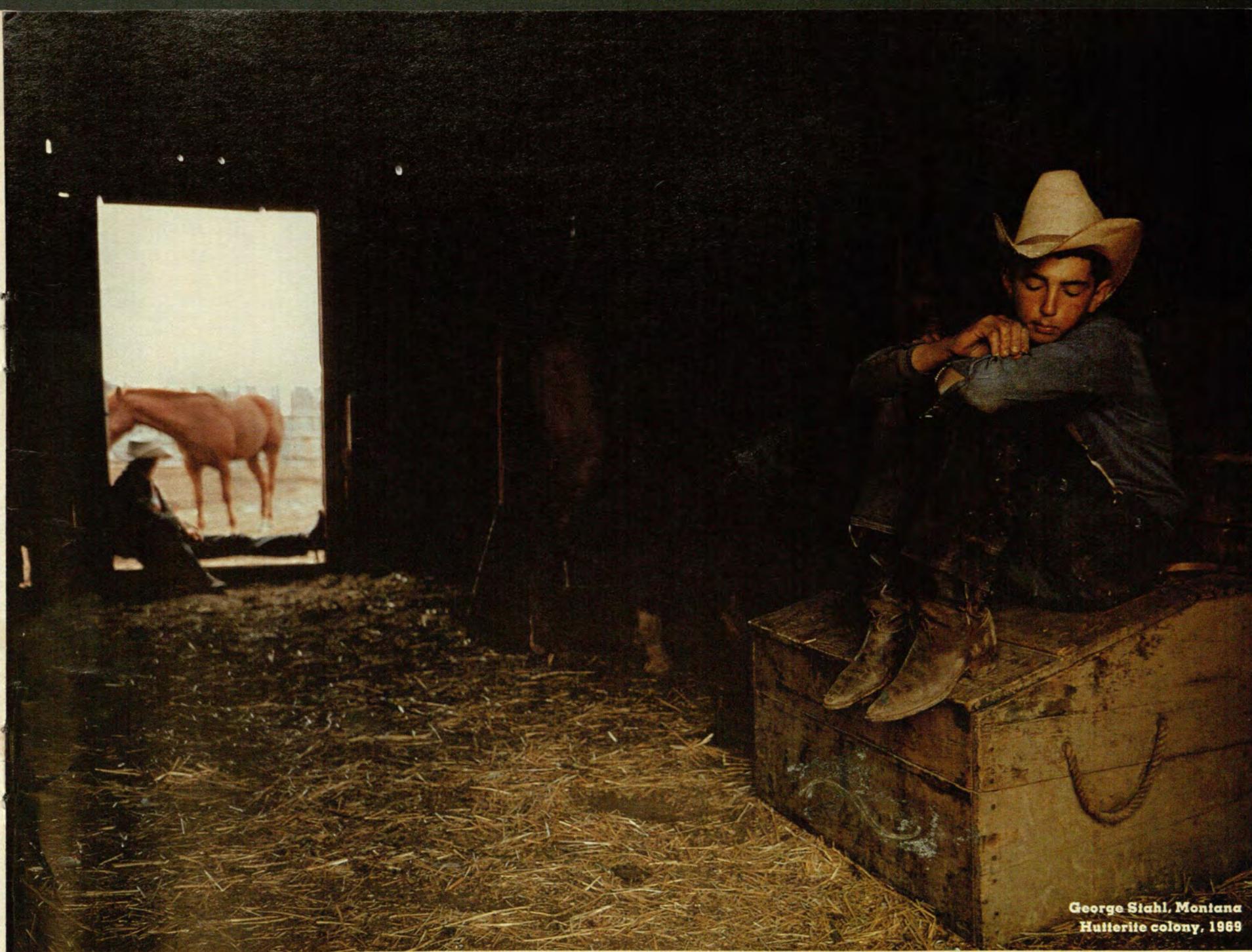
Those of you who treasure writing of the genuine West, as opposed to the myth, need no introduction to Max Evans, whose novels include *The Rounders* and other such classics. Evans began by telling us he didn't want to deceive us. "I am a member of two of America's most loathsome and contemptible minorities, and justly so. I am both a white male and a cowboy." He then began a complex

## Horses are like twenty-year-old

account of that moment of epiphany when, as a boy, he witnessed the event that led to wisdom. The old cowhand with whom young Evans was working was saddling a horse. The horse caught the cowboy in an unguarded moment and kicked the man in the stomach—a traumatic experience from which it took the cowboy several minutes to recover. When he did, he finished the saddling, patted the horse on the neck, stepped back and kicked it in the stomach.

"I asked him what he did that for," Evans told us, "and he said, 'A horse has to understand it's a horse.'"

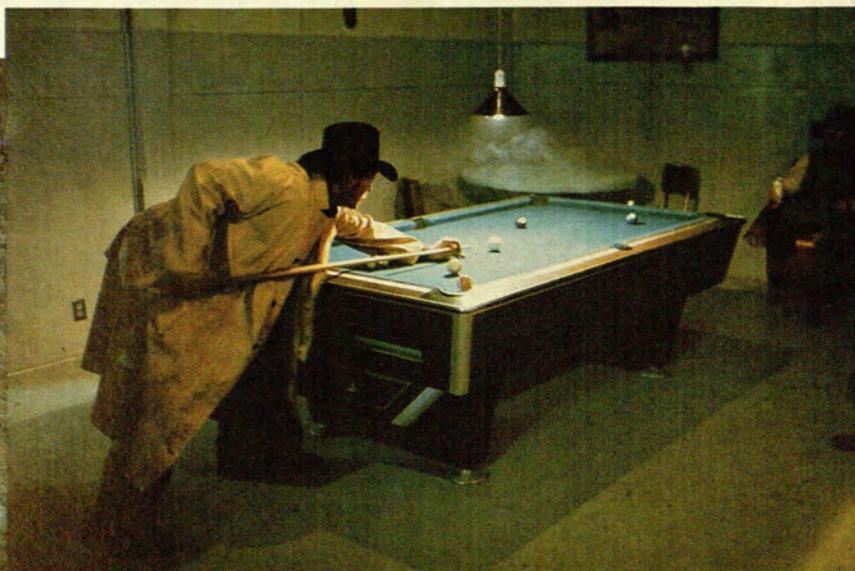
The point of this anecdote is that about 26 percent of the audience roared with delighted laughter, and about 74 percent produced polite smiles and puzzled looks. That is the ratio of Santa Fe population between Old West and New West—New Westers being those who feel it politically incorrect to kick a horse, even when common sense dictates that it needs to be done.



George Stahl, Montana  
Hutterite colony, 1969

ld tractors. If you had the money, you'd get something better

Idaho, 1975



Nevada, 1970

People live so far apart that we meet happily, like country dogs with



country dogs with tails wagging



A

s a matter of fact, attitude about horses is a common litmus test for the Old West. I live in Los Ranchos, an old village that immediately abuts both the Rio Grande and Albuquerque—New Mexico's version of urban America. My neighborhood is awash with horses. One strolls along the ditches of the valley irrigation system with eyes cast down to avoid their droppings. These are glossy, fat, pampered beasts, ridden by young ladies or members of the Bernalillo County sheriff's posse who dream of being Tom Mix. These horses are pets—not the sort of animal one would need to kick in the stomach.

Old West horses, in terms of relationship with user, are more on the order of 20-year-old tractors. You have to have it to get the work done, but if you had the money, you'd get something better. If a horse is relatively reliable, has not bitten you recently, splashed you with urine, stepped on your instep on a bitter cold morning or blown out his stomach to keep you from properly tightening the cinch, an Old Westerner looks upon it with tolerance—the same way he looks upon a chain saw that starts and doesn't need sharpening. It's still a horse, not a pet.

Once somebody failed to show up for a panel at a Western Writers of America convention, and I was sent in as a sub. A New West type in the audience asked us about our horses. I am happy to report that not one of us: a) owned a horse, b) would ride a horse if alternate transport would get you there, c) considered horses more intelligent than the average fence post. The WWA is still dominated by what remains of the Old West.

I think that as the Old West dies away, its last outpost will be Taos. This tiny little place probably has more boutiques, art galleries and tourist traps per capita than Santa Fe. But its location is so inconvenient that outsiders drawn by its beauty and its climate tend to be Old West types to whom 20th century conveniences seem unimportant. (To fly someplace, a Taoseño first drives about 75 miles to Santa Fe, where he catches a bus for another 60-mile jaunt down to Albuquerque.) But it's not just the location. Taos has an odd mystique, and it seems to change people more than they change Taos.

I have in my files the obituary of John Dunn, a leading citizen for whom the John Dunn Bridge is named. The obituary, on the front page of the Taos paper, reported that Dunn had arrived in Taos about 50 years earlier after absenting himself without leave from Huntsville prison, still owing Texas 39 and a half years of a 40-year sentence. It recounted Mr. Dunn's exploits in public transportation and as the operator of gambling establishments in Taos County, with no mention made that gambling was illegal.

"John Dunn was at his best behind a roulette wheel or a Monte Table," the obit writer said. "I have seen John Dunn stand ten hours at a roulette wheel and never look up, never sleep on the job, and never overlook a chance to slip you a short stack of chips."

Alas, that was 40 years ago this year. John Dunn is dead. Taos is not what it once was, and neither is the Old West. But it will outlive me, and you, and all the rest of us. ★

*Tony Hillerman is best known for his Navajo novels of suspense, including Coyote Waits and Talking God. Photographer William Albert Allard won the Leica Medal of Excellence for Vanishing Breed, the collection in which these images appeared.*