

NORTHERN ARIZONA'S

# MOUNTAIN *Living* MAGAZINE

Rock Art Ranch

## Custodian *of the Past*

**PLUS**

Whisk and Whisky Primer  
Border Crossroads Art  
Old Caves Crater

~~\$2.05~~

April 2019



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# April 2019



Photo by Michael Engelhard

## COVER STORY

### 8 *Custodian of the Past*

Out in the high desert, south of Interstate 40 between Winslow and Holbrook, lives one of the nation's oldest ranching vaqueros, who hosts visitors to see an eclectic collection of western curiosities and artifacts. Topping off a tour at Rock Art Ranch is an amazing view of ancient rock art in Chevelon Canyon.

## DEPARTMENTS

### MATTERS OF TASTE

**18** An introduction to Whisk and Whisky, Flagstaff's latest entry to the bourbon boom.

### BY THE BOTTLE

**22** Spring brings new local beers with light, crisp and hoppy qualities. Here's a preview of what's coming on tap.

### THE ARTS

**23** What's it like on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border? Open Doors: Art in Action puts us there with an exclusive showing of work by artists who live and create at the border crossroads.

## ALSO

- 6** EDITOR'S NOTES
- 7** ABOUT TOWN
- 34** PLAYING FAVORITES
- 35** SPOTLIGHT

### MIND & BODY

**26** A Flagstaff practitioner helps people hone in on their emotional-physical connection.

### OUTDOOR LIFE

**28** In Doney Park, a moderate hike provides for a bit of amateur archaeology with a little volcanology on the side.

### DISTINCTIVE SPACES

**32** In the home, orchids can serve as eye-catching accents or as a centerpiece in neutral décor. We tell you how to keep these living art pieces flourishing.



### ON THE COVER

*A visitor to Rock Art Ranch basks in the beauty of Chevelon Canyon where a collection of more than 3,000 petroglyphs are etched into its walls. Photo by Michael Engelhard.*

Dear self,  
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Annie, age 45

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## ROCK ART RANCH

Article and photographs by Michael Engelhard

A

t 82, Brantley Baird is one of the nation's oldest ranching vaqueros, though he swapped daylong horseback rides for driving after one hammerhead recently bucked him off.

"When you get to be my age, you don't bounce so easy," he says. "I now throw my saddle in the back of that Honda—I'm a drugstore cowboy."

The lanky gent in the paint-spattered, dusty Stetson and camouflage vest, however, is anything but a phony. He's roamed the 5,000-acre Rock Art Ranch near Winslow since 1945, when his parents leased it. At the age of 11, he found his first ancient pot on that range, the one prominent on a photo in the ranch's museum, tall as his knees, black-and-white, with intricate geometric designs.

My wife and I meet Baird at the ranch after making our reservation by phone the day before. For almost 20 years, the grizzled stockman with the lithe, rolling gait of someone much younger—someone who's spent twelve presidencies in the saddle—has been showing visitors his property, an open-air museum of pioneer history and a prime "glypher" destination. Stylish wire-rim glasses braced by a bulbous nose add a scholarly note to Baird's demeanor. While he waits for more sightseers, we explore the premises.

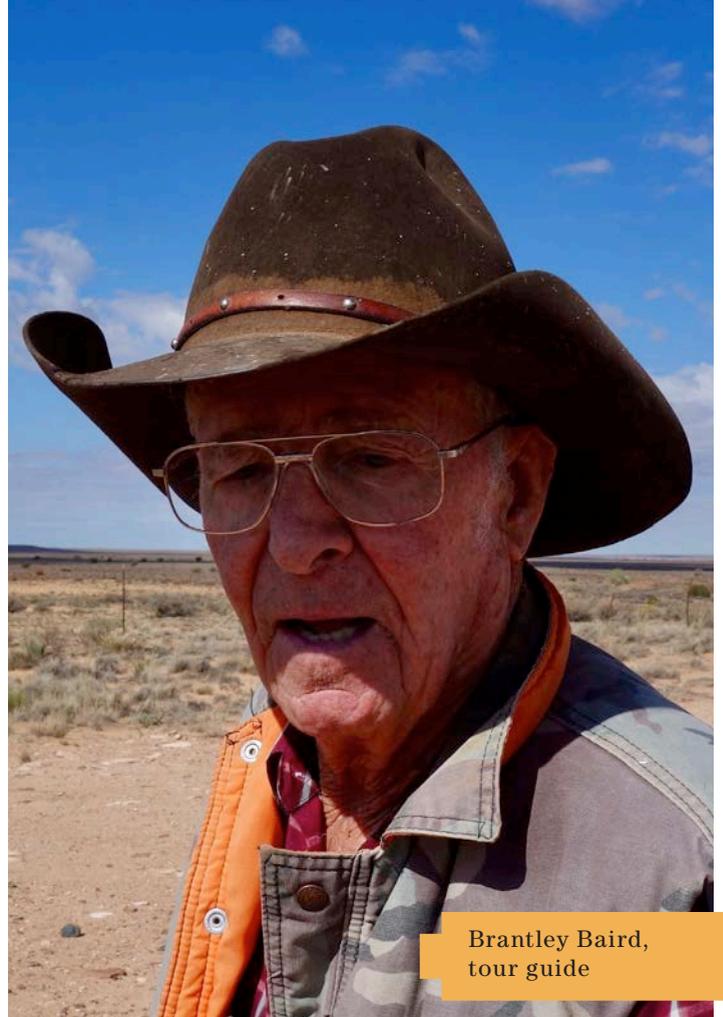
### Curiosities and celebrity

A steel-framed barn crammed and eclectic in the way of Renaissance cabinets of curiosity shields relics of livelihoods wrested from Painted Desert sand. There's a stuffed elk; a spread-eagling, tub-size tom turkey; a teeth-baring badger perched, strangely, on a shopping cart; a straight razor collection on pink velvet; a sampler of classic barbed wire types on a Texas-shaped board; arcane ranching implements; a squad's arsenal of rusty guns; folksy sayings and cowpoke cartoons; and Brantley's portrait, flanked by rowel spurs and encircled by a lariat. Under the same battered hat, he looks younger and his weathered face fuller.

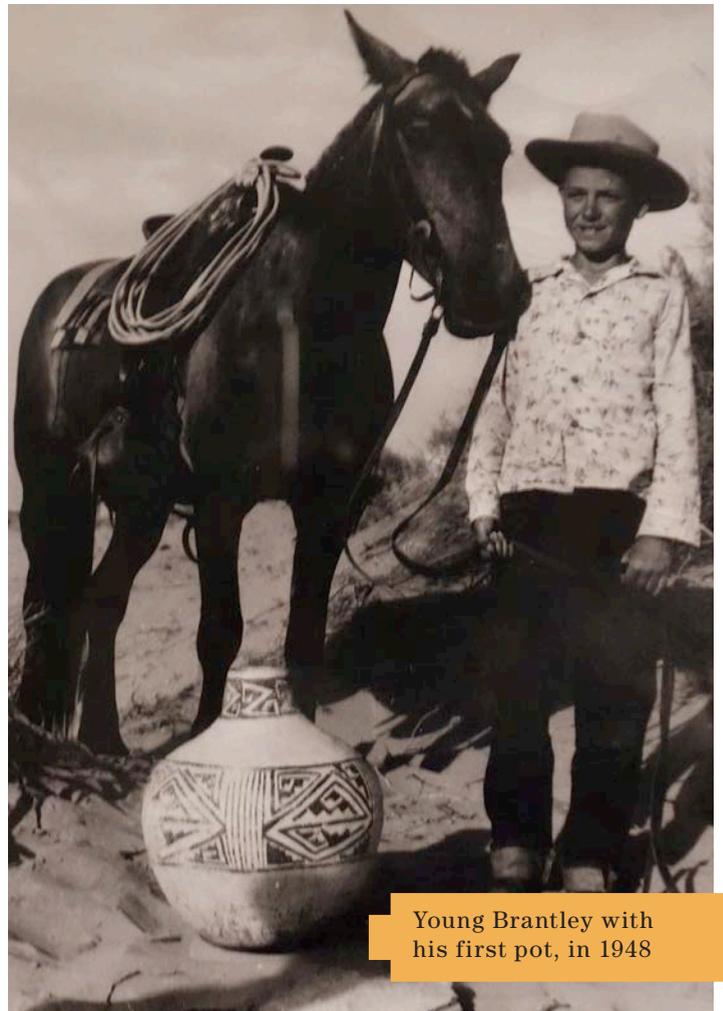
Baird has become a celebrity lately, though he'd chuckle at that designation. National Geographic has visited and the New York Times. He hosts NASA cookouts, Arizona Game and Fish meetings, and last week hired a mariachi band to entertain "old fogies" from the region's rest homes. The ranch also offers horseback outings, retracing the Mormon Honeymoon Trail and other pioneer roads. One of Baird's four "kids" or 12 grandkids help lead cavalcades, yet in bigger decisions, they defer to their elder, the Wrangler-clad lord of this estate.

The barn's inner sanctum, "the pot room," is a dimly lit cave overflowing with artifacts unearthed on the ranch, objects that would make college museums proud. Mounted arrowheads, spear points, and atlatl or throwing-dart tips crowd around massive Clovis lance heads that Paleo-Indian mammoth and bison hunters deftly flaked, and then lost, in this leonine scrubland 4,500 years before Spaniards invaded it. Shelves and glass cases hold gray urn-size vessels, smooth or "corrugated," by coiling clay. Zebra-colored mugs, pitchers, and water ladles, with zigzag, stair-





Brantley Baird,  
tour guide



Young Brantley with  
his first pot, in 1948



Chuck wagon at the ranch museum



step, and circle outlines filled in by hairline hachure in Baird's words are Anasazi "teacups, coffee pots, ice-cream scoops." "No two designs are alike," he insists. Youngsters in tow, Hopi tribal council members from the mesas to the north drop by each year to study their clans' roots and decorations almost unchanged since Europe's crusades.

More guests have trickled in, and the pot room only accommodates ten at a time. One of the granddaughters corrals half the group in the barn while the patriarch has the rest riveted. A shorthaired border collie, constantly underfoot, has replaced Brandy, a longtime spaniel-poodle companion that died the year Baird's wife did. Brantley points out several *ollas* formerly buried a day's march from each other. The big-bellied grey ware served as water caches along routes through the roughshod country. Their interment prevented breakage and kept contents cool and from evaporating. The Anasazi sealed each one with a flagstone, leaving a ladle on top to assist thirsty wanderers. The cowboy, fifteen hundred years later, spotted the lifesaving rations that the winds or rains exposed in the dunes and arroyos that line his family's spread—sprung from damp soil, exposed to the sun, these containers easily cracked. Other pots, girded with sinew or yucca fiber, could be hung from junipers, safeguarding wild seed or corn emergency rations from tunneling rodents.

### **Hashknife relics**

Outside, there is plenty more to see: A covered chuck wagon with kitchen utensils—a butter churn, Dutch oven, washbasin, pails—the wheeled equivalent of an Anasazi camp. Cross-sections of petrified wood picket groomed paths leading to the ranch's attractions. Planted in the center of one agatized rainbow slab, a hedgehog cactus provides the perfect metaphor for the homestead endeavor. The rickety, furnished bunkhouse from 1900, hauled here from the banks of the Little Colorado River, once belonged to the Aztec Land & Cattle Company's Joseph City headquarters. It's that cattle empire's last standing building. From 1884 to 1901 the famous, some would say notorious, Hashknife Outfit managed two million unfenced acres, grazing sixty thousand head on a ninety-by-forty-mile strip between Holbrook and Flagstaff. It was the biggest such enterprise in Arizona, North America's third largest. A hash knife, I'm told, was not a specialized tool but rather a run-of-the-mill blade trail cooks used for chopping spuds. The Bairds' own hot-iron glyph augments the H brand on a matted steer hide draped over a fence. Inside the Hashknife hands' domicile, a two-story bunk with rope webbing instead of mattress springs illuminates the adage "Sleep tight . . ." Wedges outside the bedframe allowed tautening the ropes when they were sagging. Sound sleep after twelve hours on horseback was never a luxury. As an ex-trail guide, I remember this well, or my back end does.

Playing follow the leader in our cars, all twenty of us caravan to the next of Baird's dirt-road destinations. He fenced the site in, barring his cloven-hoofed beauties from trampling it. While he waits for human stragglers, our guide ticks off distant landmarks, vaguely waving at each with a sinewy, age-spotted hand. Lightning torched a juniper in the vicinity with him within spitting distance belying the truth he had learned as a child that trees promise safety besides shade. His phone jingles frequently, a florid tune, not the expected country bit. Callers make reservations or ask again for directions having lost their way after exiting Interstate 40. To us, Baird describes the current drought, which browned many trees. "We only had one two-inch rain this summer"—he pauses for the punch line—"with drops two inches apart." Cattle had to be fed expensive hay as so often before. Baird used to own thirty "buffaloes" but sold them, though

not for lack of native forage. The bison simply were too pesky, knocking down fences, goring and killing a cow, hooking and flipping ranch vehicles.

### **Ancient remains**

Baird unlocks the gate, and we troop up a roped-off path. “Please don’t pick up potsherds,” a sign says. “There’s not much else to do for fun on a ranch,” he remarks overly modest about his passion for poking around. Fragments of many tones and sizes litter the plot like shattered skulls, mixed with chipped flint—bowl rims, pots’ bottoms, mug handles . . . The treasure suggests some archaic custom, like Polterabend, the German pre-nuptial smashing of china for good luck. It’s in fact the debris of daily existence, flawed crockery dumped on the trash heap together with ashes, animal bones, cornhusks, and on occasion, eggshells or turkey dung. Early Puebloans pushed from their homelands by famine or war stored household goods they hoped to stash for better times. Most never returned. Erosion of their pits caused much damage. Looting, which can account for such wreckage, never affected this ridge, thanks to Baird acting as caretaker.

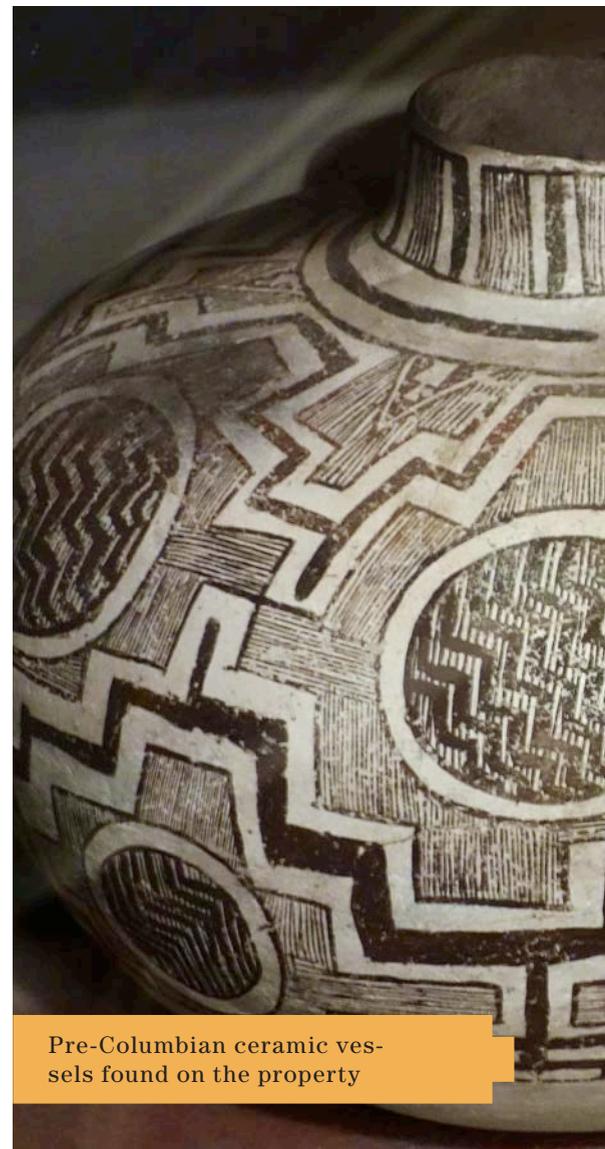
A sheet metal shed roofs a three-room pueblito from circa 1500. Excavated by Northern Arizona University archaeologists, the knee-high stacked-stone foundations mark the home of several families, owners of the puzzle-piece pots outside. Bones of a girl, a relative perhaps, surfaced in nearby Bell Cow Canyon. The researchers reburied them after examination, and volunteers poured a concrete gravestone. “Ky-otes,” according to Baird, dig up human remains; calcium-starved livestock then chews on those.

Back in our trucks, after a peek at an Anasazi map carved into a wash’s bedrock, we bump-jostle to the next stop on Baird’s curatorial merry-go-round. That’s Irene Esky’s former camp, upgraded into a heritage park. Before the Hashknife broke up and was sold by the parcel, this hardscrabble sustained other lives, if just barely. Prior to 1876, Hopis and Navajos grazed sheep here; a Basque successor did the same. Of the fenced-in structures, only the Hopi natural-stone house and parts of the woman’s rotund, mud and beam-roofed hogan are original. The stonewall sheep pen, shade ramada of cut branches, men’s hogan—a juniper-scented combination of adobe tipi and log chapel-workshop for post-puberty males—and sweat lodge with fire pit ringed by basalt chunks carted in from Flagstaff were built to Irene’s specifications. Her family maintains these dwellings, blessing and re-mudding them every year. We do not meet the Navajo matriarch who at 112 busily weaves rugs somewhere near the Hopi mesas; but judging from a bleached picture in Baird’s museum, she’s his formidable counterpart in a long purple skirt and traditional blouse.

### **Big stuff**

Baird shed his hunting vest in the heat and is sitting this one out. His granddaughter instead does the requisite interpretation. “Are you folks tired?” he now asks through our truck’s rolled-down window. Suffering sightseeing burnout my wife and I have returned while the rest keep milling about. “Just eager for the big stuff,” I reply unthinkingly, referring to this petroglyph obsession of mine. That seems to wound our host. “It’s all big stuff,” he says, as if my focus questioned his dusty decades, his Latter-Day-Saintly inheritance.

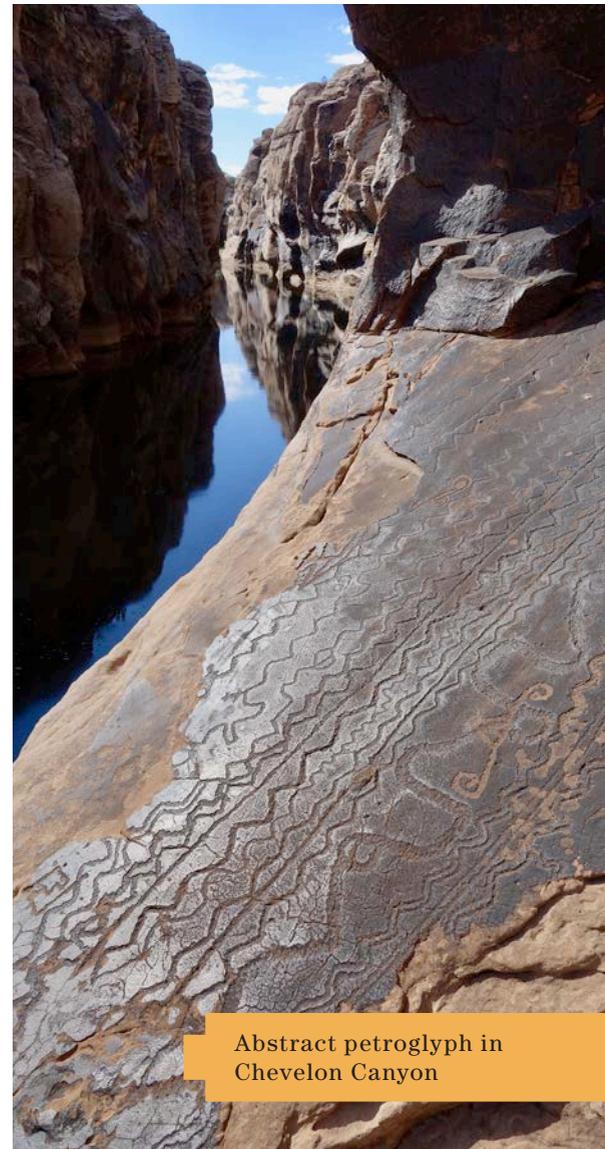
At long last we park at the lip of Chevelon Canyon, a Coconino Sandstone gash cleaving this brittle expanse. Sixty-foot walls with bluish-black patina bracket the willow-lined creek and stretch out as a canvas for one of the Southwest’s most thrilling alfresco “art” galleries. For its



Pre-Columbian ceramic vessels found on the property

creators, a permanent spring five miles upstream multiplied the cliff pocket’s appeal. Anthropologists before their survey budgeted roughly five months to find and document every petroglyph panel. It took eight years instead. More than three thousand glyphs pecked with hammer stones into mineral patina span a period of six thousand years. Clustering most densely along a quarter-mile bend of Chevelon Creek called “The Steps,” they represent different cultures: Archaic, Anasazi, Navajo, and Puebloan—Hopi and Zuni. Unsurprisingly, Baird’s Chevelon Steps is listed in the National Register of Historic Places.

Baird considers this natural breach, the sole access within miles, “a place the Good Lord made for these people to get down into the canyon.” Making it easier yet for modern, less nimble visitors, Baird constructed metal stairs and railings to the bottom, a footbridge across the creek, and, jutting from the rim, a



Abstract petroglyph in Chevelon Canyon

roofed viewing platform with picnic tables. A sign at the gate warns that you enter at your own risk. “We haven’t lost too danged many,” the site’s steward assures the timid. Still, a rattler buzzing my wife at the parking lot reminds us to pay attention.

The granddaughter introduces the rock art below from the observation deck but does not escort us downstairs. We’re told to take as much time as we want and of a shortcut to drive back out when we’re done.

### Primitive expression

Sand trails probing thick vegetation end at panels named Holding Hands, Cinderella, or the Birthing Scene. Inspecting the details, I climb ledges on which lean engravers worked up good sweats. I ford the creek, waist-deep here, to reach my favorite panel. On this rockslide, a “rake” with wavy tines, a “rain symbol,” gleams in varnish next to an antlered, triangular guy, and





Cactus growing in a petrified tree cross-section

meanders and mazes that still grace Navajo rugs, Hopi pottery and treaded Chaco hiking sandals. Elsewhere, six-foot arrows sign a vertical crack, one forbidding exit. Deer and bighorn sheep, a few superimposed on older marks, mingle with humanoids ranging from stick figures to patterned bodies sporting antennae. There are enough strange-looking morphs here to give any sci-fi fan fainting spells.

What do they signify? What is the message I cannot decode while, equally unintelligibly, birds chirp in the mesquite and the creek gurgles at my back? The shamanic scrawls invoke essentials—fertility, exodus, death, epic hunts, shapeshifting and the magic of water. Perhaps these seers, kin to nectar-siphoning, tipsy sphinx moths, primed for the sacred by ingesting hallucinogenic datura.

“Archaeologists don’t know what these symbols mean,” Baird has said. “They’re trying to figure it out, same as us.” He gleans the best insights not from the Heard Museum or Smithsonian Institution but from Native Americans who tour the ranch. Their forebears filed into this corridor, migrating, trading or raiding. Seasoned desert dwellers, they preferred the shady cleft to sun-struck grasslands bristling with cacti and enemy spears. Chevelon Canyon, whose name commemorates a 19th-century French trapper killed by poisonous “parsnips” (probably hemlock), linked the White Mountains’ Grasshopper Pueblo and Mogollon Rim headwaters with the Little Colorado River’s Homol’ovi settlements, a gaggle of Hopi ancestral sites close to Winslow. The third largest of those, Tsakwawayu or Blue Running Water, boasted five hundred rooms and was renamed Chevelon Ruin for its proximity to this creek. The four-story pueblo was one node in networks that encompassed Flagstaff’s Sinagua, Without Water people, merchants of obsidian, an inky volcanic glass for tools and arrowheads that cut like scalpels. The web expands even farther. Little Colorado River

Puebloans reworked a Pleistocene hunter’s spear point, which later surfaced again, eleven millennia after first being honed, near Chevelon Ruin.

The canyon in its entirety today is seldom traveled. A two-hundred-acre, ponderosa-rimmed, cobalt blue reservoir in the Apache–Sitgreaves National Forests, “Arizona’s most scenic trout-lake”—filled by damming the creek—presently feeds the gorge. Few kayakers dare facing class IV rapids, shooting past three-hundred-foot ramparts at monsoon levels. Wall-to-wall flows in the slot’s lower reaches prevent scouting those bucking-bronc runs.

The ranch’s future as a tourist Mecca hung in the balance when Baird fell gravely ill after his wife and dog died. Worried about liability, his sons were loath to continue allowing strangers in. Luckily, the old-timer got right back into the saddle, or rather, his truck seat.

Once he is gone, who’ll interpret the local past with such quirkiness, such gusto and depth? Who’ll connect his era to the present? “My grandkids ask if we had running water and I’d tell them yes. We’d take the bucket and run to the well,” he’s said in an interview. “Nowadays, it’s a completely different world, completely. It’s important to let people know how special this place is and how rich in history.” ▲



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