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“You see, George, you really do have a wonderful life”
One morning not long ago, a prominent, local man came into the newspaper office. He’s done that a few times before. He might be on his way to Denver, or he might have come to town on business. Whatever the circumstance or, he’s stopped by the office just to say hello, just to make sure we’re continuing to do what we do and, sometimes, just to let us know he’s glad we’re doing it.

This man is a thinker. Yes, I know. He’s also a farmer and a businessman and a leader in his community. And he’s just about as much of an expert as an expert can be on everything a person would ever want to know about millet.

Distinguished as those things are, those things are, nonetheless, the things he does. What he is... is a thinker. And he’d clearly been thinking about something that morning because he clearly had something to say.

“I’ve been all around the world,” he began. “Russia. Asia. All sorts of different places in Europe—I’ve been there. I’ve been very lucky to have opportunities present themselves that just don’t come along very often, and there’ve been times when I probably could have packed up and moved any place I wanted. There have also been other times—tough times, you could say—when I thought, well, maybe it’s time to just quit farming and try something new someplace else.” He stopped for a brief moment, catching up to the
words that he'd just said and letting them sink back in to his thoughts. “But I never left,” he said. “I never moved away. I always stayed right here. There are probably people in the world who would wonder why. If I was going to be honest, I’d have to say I’ve wondered why myself a time or two. But I think I know the answer. I think I know why I stayed.” And then he smiled, just a bit. “It’s the people.”

It’s the people.

Small towns might be a little long on older (maybe even empty and older) buildings and a little short on Starbucks, sushi bars and spas. An exciting Friday night might consist of going to the high school football game, and there’s a good chance that, during the week, most people are in bed by 9pm. And, yes, a lot of stores are still closed on Sundays.

There may be occasional disagreements among the men who get together for coffee at the local gas station every morning and there may have been a time or two when a few cross words were said between women after a luncheon or church. But all of that is forgotten if it comes to helping out a neighbor in trouble.

And when a baby is born, you’d think everyone in town was his aunt or uncle. When the kindergarten puts on a play, there will be people in the audience who haven’t had a child—or a grandchild—in school for longer than anyone cares to remember. And when someone passes away, the entire town grieves, showing up at the funeral, offering love and support and shedding tears right along with the family.

It’s the people.

Our visitor knew this. In the classic Christmas film, “It’s a Wonderful Life,” the character George Bailey learns this lesson, too. All the while he was so desperate to get away and see the world, what he really wanted was what he already had in the love and friendship of people. And we, the staff at the Independent, know it, too.

And, so, in the spirit of the classic holiday film and our own appreciation of small towns and the people who live there, this holiday edition is a celebration of…well…what a wonderful life it can be.

Happy Holidays, and God bless us, every one.

Priscilla Waggoner
Editor
In 1939, a man named Philip Van Doren Stern had a dream which so moved him that he decided to write it down. Four years and 4,000 words later, he finished the work, titling it "The Greatest Gift". Unable to find a publisher, he published it himself, making 200 copies that he sent out as "Christmas cards". One of those Christmas cards ended up in the hands of David Hempstead, a Hollywood film producer, who showed it to Cary Grant who saw himself playing the lead role.

So, Hempstead bought the rights. Screenwriters were hired. Cary Grant was still on board. It seemed Mr. Van Doren Stern was about to become an overnight success... except for one problem. No one—not even some of Hollywood's best screenwriters—could come up with the right take on the script.

Well, Hollywood ain't nothin' if it ain't fickle, and, before long, the producer lost interest. Grant took another role, and the story was destined to end up covered with dust on the bottom shelf of the book case in the back room.

And then Frank Capra entered the picture, so to speak.

A year and a half later, on December 20, 1946, lights dimmed in movie theaters across America, and audiences saw the first frames of "It's a Wonderful Life" come up on the silver screen. At that time, no one realized that the film they were about to see would one day be considered among the best films ever made and forever associated with Christmas.

Neither did audiences know that, even with Capra on board, the road leading up to the making of "It's a Wonderful Life" had been very, very long in ways no one could imagine.
During the Great Depression of the 1930s, movies became the great escape for 60 to 80 million people a week, all seeking a distraction from the hardship of the times. Back then, a ticket cost a nickel—the same as a gallon of gas or a pack of cigarettes—and audiences got their money’s worth as that nickel bought them a cartoon, a news reel, a B feature and the main movie.

For quite a while, audiences found the diversion they were looking for in the whirling dance steps of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, the “you dirty rat” gangster films of James Cagney and Edward G. Robinson or the slapstick, crazy antics of the Marx Brothers.

But hard times just got harder. Desperation pervaded both cities and towns, and audiences sought something stronger than diversion. They needed reassurance. They yearned for a glimmer of hope. They longed for stories that strengthened and grounded them in the belief that they would survive what seemed like increasingly terrifying times.

And then, in the mid-1930s when Frank Capra’s movies began to hit the screen, audiences found what they needed.

Born the youngest of 7 children in a very poor town in Italy, Frank “Ciccio” Capra immigrated with his family to America when he was 5 years old. Seventy five years after the day when their ship sailed into the New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty slowly came into view, Capra still recalled what his father told him.

“Ciccio, look! Look at that!” His father had placed the boy on his shoulders and pointed toward the lady in the harbor. “That's the greatest light since the star of Bethlehem! That's the light of freedom! Remember that, Ciccio. Freedom.”

And so began Frank Capra’s love affair with America.

As Capra grew into adulthood, he set his sights on making films, convinced that his love for his ad-
It’s a Wonderful Life
kiowacountyindependent.com

opted country and its people contained a message that needed to be heard, a message that Capra, himself, believed with all his heart. Even when things get tough—even as tough as they were during the Depression—the common, everyday man still possesses the decency, strength and moral courage to stand up to forces much larger than himself.

Capra’s films were stories of hope and optimism in a time when those things were in very short supply. And people flocked to his movies by the millions. During the 30s, he was the most loved, most famous, most respected and the recipient of the most Academy Awards in Hollywood.

Capra had an enormous gift. But he had another talent, as well. The producer, director, screenwriter was capable of getting the best possible performances out of the actors he worked with, including, among others, Jimmy Stewart.

Growing up in the small town of Indiana, Pennsylvania, James Maitland Stewart embodied what it meant to be the all American boy. He came from a very close family who went to the Presbyterian Church every Sunday and held hands while they said grace at dinner every night. His father owned the only hardware store in town, and Jimmy worked there every day after school and on the weekends. He was a good student, a good athlete, a Boy Scout. He sang in the church choir. He was an avid reader and an accomplished musician. Although very “popular with all the girls”, he was known for being nothing but respectful.

Yes, sir. The all American boy and then some.

When Stewart graduated from high school, the 6’3” tall and lanky young man had dreams of going to the Naval Academy and becoming a pilot. But it wasn’t to be; his father wanted him to attend his alma mater, Princeton University, instead.

It was at Princeton where Stewart discovered acting. A series of well-reviewed roles in plays, some summer theater, and—who would have believed it—Jimmy was given a contract by MGM in 1935. And that big studio contract led to being in films which led to a very big event: meeting the man who would not just change but, perhaps, even save his life.

That man was Frank Capra.

From the beginning, Capra and Stewart had a connection that was rare, especially in Hollywood. Capra saw Stewart as the embodiment of the Everyman character, stating, “Jimmy Stewart isn’t just intelligent, he’s idealistic. That’s a pretty fine combination in any man, actor or not.”

For his part, Stewart paid Capra the highest compliment an actor could pay a director, saying Capra “has this tremendous sense of story, and underneath it all is a wonderful sense of humor.”

Their first movie together was Mr. Smith Goes...
to Washington, a performance that earned Stewart a nomination for Best Actor. Then, in 1940, Stewart starred in Capra’s The Philadelphia Story, which opened to great critical and financial success. It seemed nothing could stop the pair when something did exactly that and more.

The world was going to war.

While Stewart and Capra were making films, Hitler was invading Poland, and Britain and France declared war on Germany. In preparation for what some felt was inevitable, the United States passed the Selective Service bill, requiring 900,000 men between the ages of 20 and 36 be drafted each year. Stewart’s number was 310. He showed up at the draft board ready to do his part only to flunk the physical. He weighed 138 pounds—5 pounds under the limit required to join the military.

Stewart’s dream of being a pilot hadn’t faded. Acting had provided enough income to rack up 400 hours of flight time and get his commercial pilot’s license. He’d even bought his own small plane. But being a pilot wasn’t the only thing drawing him to the military.

Stewart came from a line of men who had answered when duty called going back to the Revolutionary War. His grandfather fought in the Civil War. His father fought in both the Spanish-American War and World War I. Defense of country was in his blood.

After failing his physical, Stewart ate the most fattening food he could find and then enlisted in the Army Air Corps, passing the physical with one single ounce to spare.

But acting wasn’t letting go of him quite yet. In the midst of everything, Stewart was awarded an Oscar for Philadelphia Story, which he promptly gave to his father who put it in the window of the hardware store in Indiana. One month after winning the Academy Award, Stewart signed his induction papers.

MGM studio executives were less than enthusiastic with Stewart’s decision. Asked by a frustrated studio boss why in the world he would give up his life in Hollywood, Stewart said, “This country’s conscience is bigger than all the studios in Hollywood put together, and the time will come when we’ll have to fight.”

Private James Stewart reported for duty at Fort McArthur and began intensive pilot training. Two short months later, the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

With training behind him, Stewart was immediately promoted to 2nd Lieutenant and transferred to Mather Field in California where he taught new pilots to fly B-17s and B-24s.
Stewart requested to be sent into combat, as was everyone else. His chance finally came with the creation of a B-24 bomber group, the 445th, where he was appointed commander of the 703rd squadron stationed in England. On some missions, he commanded as many as 100 planes in the air. Their assignments: bomb German targets. Unlike other officers, Stewart—now a Captain—got to know his men and formed strong bonds of friendship. That camaraderie carried a heavy price when his men started to be killed on missions. Jimmy Stewart—the conscientious all-American boy—was fighting his own battle. He felt each death intensely, holding himself responsible. He wrote the letters to parents; he maintained a strong persona before his men. But the destruction he saw, the deaths in the air he witnessed... when alone, Jimmy was unable to hold his food down and unable sleep at night, his strength sapped even as the missions became more and more deadly. He flew 20 combat missions in all, losing 130 men. But the event most devastating to his soul was when the 445th was assigned to bomb a V1 rocket facility in a town in northern France. The instruments in Stewart’s plane malfunctioned, and the bombers dropped 30 tons of general purpose bombs on a town north of the target, killing an untold number of civilians by mistake.

As one biographer wrote, “At that point, Stewart had been ground down to nothing, and his youth had died.”

After the war, Stewart returned to Hollywood, but the man who returned was not the same man who had left nearly five long years before. He was 37 years old but looked more like he was 50. He was plagued by nightmares every night. His hair had grayed; his face was strained; there was an edge to his voice and an awkward stiffness to his movements that hadn’t been there before. He felt like a stranger in a strange land.

Acting seemed shallow and silly compared to what he’d seen. But it was the only career he’d ever known, and studios were no longer interested in him. Although they had a different name for it back then, Jimmy Stewart was deep in the throes of PTSD.

And then Frank Capra showed up. Like Stewart, Capra had been called to war and was looking to re-establish himself in film. He also had a script where he felt Jimmy Stewart—and Stewart alone—could play the lead.

Capra started to tell Stewart the story, saying it opened with a man about to commit suicide. Stewart jumped up and started to walk out of the room. “Are you crazy?” Stewart yelled. “I can’t be in a movie like that—I can’t possibly play that role!”

Undeterred, Capra continued with the story, creating for Stewart an image of Bedford Falls, the characters of Mary and Potter and the angel Clarence Oddbody. He painted a picture of George Bailey, without admitting that he was convinced Stewart was like Bailey in very many ways.

It was only Stewart’s trust of Capra that made him take the role, a decision he often questioned during filming. In one scene, Stewart’s character was to kiss Mary Hatch (played by Donna Reed). Stewart was overtly anxious. It had been years since he kissed a woman, and he wasn’t sure how believable it would be. The scene turned out better than could be imagined. The scene with Reed captured a conflicted passion unlike any scene filmed in years, and the bar scene resonated with an honesty of desperation that leapt off the screen.

The anguish in his soul was inescapable, and Stewart soon realized—with Capra’s help and support—that his only hope was to use the pain in portraying the role of George. It clearly added a remarkable depth to his performance, but Stewart only spoke with Capra about how he felt—no one else. As a result, it’s not clear if Stewart was even aware of how his performance was impacted.

However, in one pivotal scene, George, believing his life is lost, asks God for guidance. When the cameras started rolling, Stewart surprised everyone—the crew, Capra, everyone—by unexpectedly tearing up and beginning to cry while saying his lines. On screen, the scene was enormously powerful. Later, when it was discovered that the moment was “all Stewart” and not a part of the script, Jimmy was asked what he was thinking. He simply
said, “I was thinking of all the people who were completely without hope. I was thinking how they had no one to turn to.”

When the film premiered in 1946, it got mixed reviews. Some immediately called it a classic, but others said it was “too dark” for a country still recovering from war. The naysayers won; the movie didn’t even make a profit.

Studio executives were so dispirited by the reception that they failed to catch an error in copyright which, starting in the ‘70s, put the film in public domain. Just about every television station in the country showed the film during Christmas, and, for the next two decades or more, new generations fell deeply and permanently in love with “It’s a Wonderful Life.”

For their parts, Stewart and Capra may not have made any money off the showing, but both men were alive to see the film get the honor and recognition it so richly deserved.

Despite staying in the Army until he retired as a Brigadier General in 1968, Jimmy Stewart never spoke publicly or privately about his war experiences. Never. He would, however, describe “It’s a Wonderful Life” as the best film of his career.

There’s also a story that Stewart reportedly felt he owed Capra his life... that things were getting very, very dark, and he felt like Capra reached into the hole and pulled him out. It was only because of Capra that Stewart returned to acting full time and continued in the industry until his death in 1997.

“It’s a Wonderful Life” was not only the chance of a lifetime, it also quite probably saved his life.

Years later, when asked about both his life and the film having a “happy ending”, Stewart simply said in his characteristic way, “Well, yes. Yes, that’s true. It is. And... you really have to pay for that happy ending.”
“God... oh, God... dear Father in heaven... I’m not a praying man, but, if you’re up there and you can hear me, please show me the way. I’m at the end of my rope. Please. God, show me the way.”

In the film “It’s a Wonderful Life”, these were lines uttered by the character of George Bailey when he was experiencing one of the darkest moments he’d ever known. They’re simple words, maybe even familiar words to some. Who among us has not called out to some unseen being or entity or force when we have found ourselves in the throes of our own dark night of the soul? No doubt, there are those folks who will quickly say they have not. But even more certain are the many, many people who have.

Leo Tolstoy, one of the great Russian writers, once wrote that “faith is life itself”. That was a hard won statement for old Leo. Known as a “religious” man until he was in his early 40s, Tolstoy experienced a sudden, almost paralyzing spiritual crisis when he felt the withdrawal of God’s presence from his life. “God’s absence”, as he described it, sent him on a desperate but, for him, ultimately redemptive search to rediscover his faith, for it was in faith that Tolstoy believed God resided.

So, what does it mean to believe? What is spirituality? What impact does spirituality have on the way we live and experience life?

With an estimated 4200 known religions in the world, there’s no shortage of groups and websites who are eager to offer “answers” to these questions. But spiritual journeys are, at their essence, made by individuals, and it was the individual’s story we wanted to hear.

So we asked those questions of three different people from very different cultures. Reverend Spencer Black is a young Methodist minister and lives in Cheyenne Wells. Jeri Zimmermann was raised in the Baha’i faith and lives in Las Animas. Reginald Killsnight, Sr. is a highly respected Northern Cheyenne tribal member whose home is in Lame Deer, Montana. Mr. Killsnight served as an advisor to the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site.

What follows are their responses, and we’re very grateful for their willingness to share their thoughts.
“A WAY TO FORGIVE, HEAL AND RECONCILE OUR SINS AND THE SINS OF OUR FATHERS”

Reverend Spencer Black has been serving congregations in Cheyenne Wells, Haswell and Eads, Colorado for the last two and a half years. He received his degree in Religion and Philosophy from Emory and Henry College in Virginia and attended the Iliff School of Theology at the University of Denver.

“What is spirituality? That’s a good question. There’s a debate about that right now. Being ‘religious’ is a no no for those who aren’t fans of organized religion, but being spiritual is okay. There isn’t one definition of spirituality that everyone agrees on, but I would say it’s about a connection to the divine, to the sacred or even supernatural powers. Spirituality guides me in how I connect with others and how I connect with the world.

“For Christians like myself, spirituality is our connection or relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. It’s our own personal relationship with God and each other and the world we live in. It’s our way of living out the Gospel.

“Personally, I see spirituality as the understanding through which we find our purpose and meaning in life. It’s a process from which we define our morals and ethics, and determines how we live out our lives and how we treat one another. Most importantly it provides us a way to forgive and to heal, and to reconcile own sins and the sins of our fathers.

“This is the time of year when we remember and celebrate that God decided to change the relationship with man. That’s the purpose of Christ—the opportunity to lay down what we’ve done and then be forgiven for the things we can’t change. True forgiveness can only come from God.

“Spirituality is about our relationship with God and prayer puts the feeling into that relationship. It can be healing. It can almost be like therapy. Sometimes just saying things, just putting things into words and saying them, can bring healing. Prayer can bring true healing—there are even studies that have nothing to do with specific religions but have proven that prayer has a real and measurable effect on healing.

“Songs and ceremonies are part of that. Ritualistic empowerments like those connect us to God, connect us to each other, connect us to our past and our ancestors.

“We believe in a living God. Our relationship with Him is a living thing. It’s like a muscle that needs to be worked and exercised to be made strong. I believe that relationship is very important because we, as human beings, are meant to be in relationship with God and with others.”

“LEAVES OF ONE TREE, FLOWERS OF ONE GARDEN”

Jeri Zimmermann is a counselor who lives in Las Animas. A warm, friendly and outgoing woman in her early 70s, Jeri was raised by parents who were Baha’i (pronounced ba hi) and has been a practicing Baha’i for most of her life. As religions go, Baha’i is relatively young. Founded by a man named Baha’u’llah, which is Arabic for “Glory of God”, the seeds of the Baha’i faith were formed in the Mideast in the mid-1800s. Although it may not be familiar to many in this area, Baha’i is a world religion with over 7 million followers scattered across the globe, especially in the West where its acceptance and openness to all religions makes Baha’i especially appealing.

“Spirituality to me is the energy to move forward and never stop growing in this temporal—that is, earthly—world towards our eternal life. We are here on this earth and in this life to develop our spirituality, to focus on growing and understanding what it means to be human. When we are done
here—that is, when we die—our spirit continues on to develop even more in the spirit world.

I know these are difficult times. We’ve forgotten that human beings are all connected to each other. Even though each person is very different and unique, we’re all connected. Like the leaves of one tree or the flowers of one garden. We all have the same blood, you know?

Because of the writings of Bahá’u’lláh, we believe that God has sent divine teachers—they’re called Manifestations of God—and these teachers have provided the foundation to advance civilization. The Manifestations have been the founders of the major religions like Abraham and Moses, Krishna, Buddha, Jesus and Muhammed. The teachings of each religion all come from the same source—which is God—and are, in a way, like successive chapters of one religion from God.

We embrace all religions and believe that every person comes to God in his own way. No, we don’t have to agree with each other, but we do need to connect because it’s crucial for us to find a vision of the future that unites us in the nature and the purpose of life.

Spirituality makes an enormous difference in my life. Because of my faith, I know that, no matter how difficult things may get, I haven’t been forsaken. I don’t fear death because I know it’s not that different from when we were in the womb. We were born in to this life, and we’ll be born in to the next. My spirituality also helps me believe that everything is working for the good. My faith helps me to be optimistic. It gives me hope.”

“IT’S A WAY HOME FOR US”
Mr. Reginald Killsnight, Sr is a member of the Northern Cheyenne tribe and lives in Lame Deer, Montana. He was recently in Kiowa County, Colorado as part of the annual Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run. While he was here, he agreed to speak about some of his traditional beliefs.

Mr. Killsnight was speaking only for himself and his beliefs and not on behalf of the Northern Cheyenne tribe.

With the exception of what’s in italics, these are his words and his words, alone.

“We believe in the creator who is the maker of all things. We look to the creator for strength and guidance. It has a lot to do with the way we were taught. The way we were taught and brought up from our younger days to today.

Spirituality is a real important part of our traditional ways.

The way we were taught, once we get into our ceremonies, we’ve got to live that life. It’s all the spirituality of life. We take the younger generation and teach them the same way, and it’s kind of a daily thing. Every day we try to live like that. It’s...
not different from other religions—Christianity or the Catholics. We all pray to the same Creator. It’s a way home for us.”

**How does spirituality help in times that are challenging and dark?**

“It helps with temptations of everything that’s happening around us. For me, it’s... The spirituality of everything to me...you call upon the Creator. And ask Him for guidance and help. It doesn’t come right away, but it’s the way He shows it. It’s how He shows it. Yes, we do run into it a lot. We fight that, also. It’s a struggle.

Every day, morning, noon and night, we just use our spirituality to talk to the Creator. Just driving down the road...He’s always there. He never leaves us. Sometimes, some people leave Him, but He never leaves us. That’s very important.

Spirituality has a lot to do with the healing at Sand Creek. It really does because of the anger a lot of us feel. It’s just... Black Kettle was a peace camp. And it’s really hard for them to do that to our Cheyenne people. Because of the spirituality... He (Chivington) was a minister. It’s very hard for us, too.

But our own spirituality helps us deal with what happened. We’re saddened. We mourn. We mourn every time we come down here. The spirituality of it helps us a lot. We pray a lot. We’re a praying people. But we’re human, too.

That’s a big part of it—the spirituality. Because we wanted peace, you know? Black Kettle wanted peace. He wanted to be able to work with the white men. Our chiefs were peace chiefs. They were our speakers. They even wanted to work with white men so that they could take care of the women and children and elders.

If anything happens to our chiefs—anything—the children, their wives, they are supposed to sit down and smoke. They can’t harm anyone is what they’re saying. A chief’s role is very powerful. They have to walk away.

And then, there’s others who can’t forgive because of what they saw or what they were told. So it’s hard for them. I guess the only way for them to forgive is peace within themselves. But they can still mourn.

If it wasn’t for them, we wouldn’t still be here, you know?”

_I was humbled and grateful to Mr. Killsnight for speaking about something so important._

Years after making “It’s a Wonderful Life,” Frank Capra was asked what he thought made people embrace his film for more than a half century. “I wanted to make a movie that told people God loved them, and they should do the same for each other. I believe the admonition to ‘love thy neighbor’ can be the most powerful sustaining force in a person’s life. People need to know that. They want to know that. That’s about the only thing I can say.”
It didn’t seem to matter
That it was at the back
Whether your clothes were
patched or in a tatter
There was always a welcome
at the door.

The smell of mud and grass
Mingled with clay pots and flowers
On the porch before the door,
seldom latched
Where warmth from the kitchen stove
Beckoned you inside, rich or poor.

White paint kept it all quite bright
This was the entry, a place
out of the winds
but full of light
A small place, passing,
the first hug of home

Where the plants talk
To you
Greeting you, with scents of mint
and cookies baking inside

Where the plants talk
Inviting you
To forget the street and worries outside
Welcoming you

Come in from needless cares and abide
Parsley, thyme, and chives on the sill
Tomatoes, peppers and marigold starters
Greened and glowed by the back door
Trowel, shovel, watering can waited,
By rubber boots, for spring and
the last chill
And the last gloomy threat of winter
had abated

The front door all clean with
polished brass
Never belied the love behind,
kept as a trove
Except when adorned
by wreathes of cheer
As the sharing days of Christmas
were near

If you wanted to know
If you wanted to see
And smell and taste the home aglow
You went to the back door
The sunny porch held a portal to love
and more
The heart of the house opened...
through the back door.

February 13, 1999, Edgewood, NM
First Snow

By JEFF C. CAMPBELL

Barefoot I went into the frost of early snow (white)
Looking west into an evening Christmas card
The morning star, above, a moon descended, before I rose
Tires on ice humming songs of schedules and debts
Lights unknown, unseen
on crystals floating dim pink orange
and deep dark black pre-dawn blue
Framed by icicles from gutters
and leafless branches of bent trees
I’ll go that way after my early chores.

October 18, 1999, on another porch
Edgewood, NM
Travel well, Merry Holidays.

Liturgy of Christmastide

By JACEY BLUE RENNER

One of the best gifts that keeps on giving is my daughter. The best of her gifts is she’s a pal, sometimes like a kindred spirit beyond chromosomes. Maybe, as we think of Christmas, her better gift is being a better poet than me. Hope you enjoy Jacey Blue’s poem.

—Jeff. C. Campbell

The farolitos wept as she rose, winter wheat stemming through frost. Hallelujah smoldering, shouldered against the plains, pink bellied & powdered.

Hewn snow & her voice, soft stitched into every cactus, every piñon tree, whispering Oh my Mary. Oh my holy.

Cones & holly incensed, burn midnight mass.

The cardinal, mantilla in its beak, a timeless luminarie, nestled in the whorls.

“For Beloved Rose Nestor, especially at Christmas.”

(Farolitos are the same as luminarias: festive and rejoicing lights.)

Travel well and Merry Christmas

From Father and Daughter

kiowacountyindependent.com
All of us leave our mark on the world in one fashion or another. It’s in the things we do or refrain from doing, the things we say to one person and not another, the ambitions we pursue, the values we live by, the dreams we keep closest to our hearts and the ones we wear on our sleeves. It’s in the hand we extend to someone in need and the hand we take when it’s extended. All these things and more create the signature of our lives. They are the tracks we leave in the snow.

In “It’s a Wonderful Life”, the angel Clarence remarks on the extraordinary extent to which one man’s life touches another. “You’ve been given a great gift, George,” he says. “The chance to see the world if you’d never been born.”

We may never be given the “great gift” that was given to George Bailey by the angel. But, perhaps, it’s not needed. Perhaps the signature of a life simply speaks for itself.

This is a story about exactly that…and then some.
On an early spring morning in 2002, Alexa Roberts was on her way to a very significant place.

Located in Kiowa County and roughly 20 to 25 miles east of Eads, the place could only be reached by a long and somewhat circuitous route. The road, itself, would only get her so far. To reach the actual place, she would have to do the last part on foot, crossing a dry creek bed that, as the name implies, is more often filled with sand than water. After that, it was a short distance to the piece of land that held such meaning.

At first glance, it didn’t seem to be a particularly distinctive piece of ground. In fact, it was no different from the other hundreds of acres of grasslands that surrounded it.

But, in truth, everything about that piece of land was significant. It marked the end of one journey and the beginning of another whose end would, by design, never be in sight.

And it was a journey of unimaginable importance.

Those 240 acres were part of the site where, slightly less than 138 years before, soldiers with the United States Army under the command of Colonel John Chivington had massacred 230 Cheyenne and Arapaho men, women and children who were living in a peaceful encampment.

Those 240 acres also constituted the first purchase of land by the United States government for the sole purpose of creating a national historic site dedicated to healing from, learning from and, hopefully, safeguarding from a repeat of what happened on that brutal and tragic day.

Alexa had been with the project since legislation paved the way for its beginning. She had been one of the people responsible for documenting oral histories from the descendants of the massacre survivors. And, in the few months prior to that spring morning of 2002, she had been designated to negotiate acquisition of up to 12,500 acres of land that could ultimately make up the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site. Against that backdrop, there’s little doubt that the enormous gravitas of where she stood was not lost on her then nor has it lessened in the 16 years since.
In many ways, the path of Alexa’s life that led to her standing in that place on that morning began years before. Raised in New Mexico, she grew up the younger of two daughters. Her father was a veterinarian for the USDA, a position that took him all over the country on agricultural related issues. “It was my dad who taught me the importance of civil service,” she says with a hint of pride in her voice. There’s a chance that witnessing her father’s profession might have also contributed to her being the loving owner of six dogs, all of whom she has rescued.

Perhaps it was being raised in a part of the country where vestiges of ancient cultures abound. Maybe it was her own experience with unexplored personal history. However and wherever the seeds of motivation were planted, Alexa has been drawn to exploration and preservation of history for most of her life, and it’s a calling that seems to suit her well.

Consistently and genuinely humble, Alexa gives the impression of being more comfortable with listening to the tales of others than commanding attention to share her own. But when she does speak, she’s articulate with views that reflect a deep understanding of things and a natural regard for the contributions of others. It would seem that, far from viewing history as a riddle to be solved and conquered, she views the history of others to be treasures worthy of protection and preservation, if nothing else, out of simple respect for the others who deem them so.

Alexa’s calling began when she was hired to document oral histories from Navajos who used to live on what is now Wupatki National Monument land.

The Wupatki National Monument, established by President Calvin Coolidge in 1924, is located 30 miles north of Flagstaff, Arizona and west of the Little Colorado River and the Navajo reservation. The park was established to protect the significant archaeological sites of the 12th to mid-13th century Puebloan occupants of the area. Less known, and unrelated to the purposes for which the monument was created, is the archeological record of many abandoned Navajo home sites, some of which were occupied by Navajos until shortly after World War II.

In carrying out her job, Alexa heard “a tragic story” that, at that time, had never been told. Back in the 1930s, a young man, along with his wife, was sent by the Park Service to the area as its first Custodian to essentially “make a park”. Armed with practically nothing but an old Model T and a typewriter, they constructed a home among the ruins and began to document life. An elder in the Navajo tribe, who was given a uniform and a badge and made an honorary park ranger, was invaluable to the young man in teaching about plants and wildlife. The women in the tribe taught the young woman to weave. The couple did as they were told to do; they began to “make a park”, together with many of the Navajos living there.

In the late 1930s, a large expansion of the monument boundaries encompassed the homes of many Navajo residents of the area. After World War II was ended, relationships between park managers and Navajo residents changed. “Navajo people didn’t fit into the plan,” Alexa explains in her succinct, straightforward manner. She refrains from commentary and simply lets the truth of the act condemn the act itself. “The legislation that established the park didn’t include the Navajos who were living there. It was just about protecting the Puebloan archaeological sites.” Navajos, who had been living on the land for all of their lives, some of whom had been so integral in helping the first Park Service Custodians, were eventually forced—some, according to oral histories, at gun point—to
abandon their homes and move across the Little Colorado River.

Those are the people from whom Alexa had been hired to gather their oral histories. The oral history project had a profound impact. She wanted to understand more about the relationship between Navajo people and lands administered as national parks and how Navajo stories and concerns were represented.

In 1986, Alexa went to work for the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Department. Federal laws and perspectives were different back then. Even though there were numerous national parks on and around the Navajo reservation, the tribe was often not involved—sometimes not even consulted by park managers—regarding issues such as if the parks contained sites or places sacred to the Navajo people or how they should be preserved. It was the job of the Navajo historic preservation program to insert the tribe into that process and assist in paving the way such that the people who had the historic relationship with the sacred places would also have a say in how those sacred places should be preserved.

It was a theme she would revisit often in her career.

The righteousness, if you will, of this mission ignited a deep sense of responsibility on Alexa’s part, and she and her colleagues corresponded frequently with the National Park Service. “I was young and cocky and critical,” she says, somewhat chagrined. “I sent my own share of ‘nastygrams’ to the Park Service back then.”

In 1994, after earning her doctorate, Alexa applied for a job as an anthropologist in the National Park Service’s Santa Fe office. She says she heard a story that, upon considering her application, the former regional director said, “Just hire her. Get her on our side.”

Alexa can’t confirm the story but it’s likely true, given that the some of the letters she had written over the years were stacked neatly on her desk the first day she showed up for work.

In 1998, due to the determined efforts of Colorado Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell, Congress passed legislation directing the National Park Service to work with the Northern and Southern Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes and the State of Colorado to find the location of the Sand Creek Massacre and determine if it was significant enough to be an NPS site. One problem: NPS was only given 18 months to accomplish the task—a task that others had tried to no avail.

“Those first meetings between the park service and the tribes were intense,” Alexa recalls. “The Park Service had been given limited time. There was enormous pressure to get it done, and the Park Service was used to doing things a certain way. And the tribes pushed back to ensure that the park service understood the gravity of the proposed project. Nothing could be taken lightly or approached too
quickly. It was rough.” Alexa sums up her position with a nod for emphasis. “It was the tribes’ history.”

Alexa was instructed to head up the oral history project with the Cheyenne and the Arapaho descendants in hopes that their stories would contain details about where the massacre occurred. “But that’s not what people’s stories were about,” she says, pausing for a moment, looking for the right words. “Sand Creek is huge in the lives of the descendants. Huge. It changed everything. When the chiefs were killed, so much was lost. Language, the history of ceremonies, stories, songs. Entire families were wiped out. Even to speak of Sand Creek is sacred. And now, someone from the government shows up and the descendants are told that the government wants to hear their stories…? My God.”

Alexa partnered with representatives from each of the tribes to ensure that the oral histories were approached in a manner appropriate to each tribe. A memory comes to mind that illustrates the challenges inherent in what was required of the group.

While working with the Northern Cheyenne, a young man named Luke went with her to interview people and act as a translator. “Luke was very traditional,” she says. “He was a member of the Crazy Dog Society—a warrior society whose job is to protect the tribe—and he was intensely uncomfortable approaching elders and asking about Sand Creek. The process needed so much longer than just 18 months. To do it right, it should have taken at least a year just to get permission to approach the elders, but we didn’t have that time. We only had 18 months.”

She describes one day when she and Luke went to an elderly woman’s house. “I stayed in the car while Luke knocked on the door,” she recalls. “I saw the woman answer. I knew what Luke was asking her. And I…I’ll never forget the expression on her face. She stepped back and put her hand on her chest and just backed away from the door. Years later, she was still fearful of speaking to the government about Sand Creek. Of course, we left and didn’t impose on her any further.”

Alexa shakes her head at the memory. “The oral history was theirs,” she says. “They were the ones to decide how things were going to go.”

In November of 2000, almost 136 years to the day after the massacre, the law was signed into effect authorizing the establishment of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site to “recog-
nize the national significance of the massacre in American history, and its ongoing significance to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people and the descendants of the massacre victims.”

And so, a year and a half later, Alexa found herself standing on 240 acres the government had just purchased, and the memory still reverberates, 16 years later.

“I stood there on that land and I thought... Oh, my God. What have we done. There’s no going back. The government owns this piece of land now. It’s started. It was theoretical before but now it’s started. We own it. The level of responsibility felt enormous.”

In the years since then, Alexa Roberts along with staff members, tribal representatives with whom they’ve worked hand-in-hand, subject matter experts and partners from NPS, the state and Kiowa County have all been driven by a strong sense of responsibility to do the right thing. “We were asked to do a job that we had no real idea how to do—no one had ever done anything like this before. But we had an overriding sense of the importance in doing...the right thing. There’s no other way to put it.”

The national historic site staff realize the enormous importance of the site’s role in educating the public about the significance of the Sand Creek Massacre in the nation’s history and in the contemporary lives of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. “It’s difficult to convey,” she says. “But subsequent federal Indian policies, including dependence on federal government programs for living and resulting poverty, health and social issues... all that—all of that—is the result of events like Sand Creek.” She looks briefly out the window. “The site is important because, after 140 years, with the establishment of the Sand Creek Massacre National Historic Site there was finally acknowledgement and the beginning of a new awareness,” she states. “Yes, the government acknowledged it was wrong right after the massacre happened, but it’s really important that, even with controversy that has continued to surround the massacre since 1864—especially when the site was being designated—even with that, the federal government was willing to say, yes, it is the site of a massacre for which the United States was responsible. Yes, we will designate it as a place of the highest national significance, and, yes, we’ll take care of it in perpetuity.”

She shakes her head. “So many things could have derailed the process over the years but a path forward always opened up. The role of prayer by the Cheyenne and Arapaho people can’t be overlooked. We were guided by something that was so much larger than all of us.” She smiles. “The Sand Creek Massacre Spiritual Healing Run has been going for 20 years. There will be a new visitor’s center. The research center will be a big factor—the Holocaust Museum and other organizations are already interested in working together. So much has been done by so many people working together. And there’s still so much to do.”

After devoting a third of her life to the Sand Creek Massacre site, Alexa Roberts retired from her position as Superintendent on October 31st of this year. “Of course, it’s hard to leave. It’s been a huge part of my identity for a long time, and I love Kiowa County and my coworkers and our Cheyenne and Arapaho colleagues—we’re like family,” she says. “But it’s never been about the efforts of one person. It’s a collective. The tribes are the spiritual stewards of Sand Creek, and the Park Service is the physical steward. Our job is to take care of it... so that they can take care of it. And I did what I could as a part of that.”

She then lifts her clear eyed gaze and smiles. “It’s been an honor, and I wouldn’t trade a day of it for anything. And I guess that’s all I have to say.”

kiowacountyindependent.com
Filled with conundrums, dreams are awful baffling, most times consternating and oft times downright weird.

Woke up this morning in the dark. It was raining, cold and quiet. Love the smell of rain, even this late in the year. Walked into the room where this writing box sit. Turned the machine on and started putting words to screen about that dream.

Seems I was a substitute rural mail carrier, somewhere in rural New Mexico, at least judging by the countryside. Of course there’s no rules in dreams so my route covered the foothills of some piñon and juniper covered area, but then I was up closer to the mountains and then out on the flats. Along the way I had a couple adventures. It seems like as if it was around Christmastime.

This dream was different. Usually I’m a third person character, but I knew I was in it because my hands were on the steering wheel.

Never have been a rural mail person. Received but not delivered. Odd. Been a rural school bus driver on some of the longest routes in the U. S. and been a substitute school bus driver out in ranch and the Davis Mountains country of West Texas and as far south in New Mexico as you can get without changing citizenship. Been an activity bus driver too, but all that is for another time.

For most of the first half of this life there was always a relative I wrote to like my Aunt Sis, or cousin Carol or Grandpa Don on some Rural Free Delivery mail route. Don lived on RR#2 and Sis lived off of Rt. 23 on a rural route whose number slips my mind. Likewise, always wondered why my folks wanted to live in town, but that was a generational thing. One wants to live in town, while the next wanted to go back to the country life on a ranch or farm. By the time I could afford to make a choice I didn’t have the time or will to start a small cow-calf operation or start up a farm from scratch.

Working on Don’s farm we’d come in for noon meal about the time the mail was put in the box. Out the dining room window you could see the R.F.D. mailman reach out his passenger window, shut the door on the oversize metal box, put the red flag down showing he’d picked up the outgoing mail, then drive south.

While Don was putting the finishing touches on the meal, I’d walk down slope, down the lane, cross the bar (borrow) ditch, retrieve the mail and papers and walk back to the main room in the farm house where he was putting bowls and plates on the big old dining table. We’d eat amongst farm implement magazines and Corn Flakes boxes. Seems like we’d eat a lot. Lots of potatoes, fresh truck patch vegetables and always a helping or two of some beef, pork or ham and of course fresh boiled coffee. Afterwards my great uncle “P.W.” would gather up the mail and plop down in his big old rocker by the south facing window next to the stove to sort through the mail. (This was actually his home, but...
Whenever he got to the last page and finished up the newspaper with the market report he’d haphazardly fold it. We knew it was time to go back to work till dark.

So, for some reason the Christmas card hadn’t been clearly addressed, but filling in for the female rural delivery gal I felt compelled to see every card and letter was delivered.

I know you’re not supposed to open the mail, but as the dream would have it two photos were inside and they just fell out. [Sounds like a dramatic device. Who’s directing this dream anyway?] There was a picture of a tawny auburn haired and lightly freckled woman, clearly a ranch woman with something like corrals in the background. The other was a picture of some white limestone and red sandstone bluffs or cliffs. Now I kind of recognised the geology of the landscape and was sure I’d seen that area dotted with mesquite and greasewood on the side and maybe some cedars on top of the red caprock. The woman was more than familiar, but I couldn’t remember her name.

As I drove from mailbox to the next, delivering mail along with newspapers to the round yellow tubes along the route I ran into folks asking them if they knew the woman. Like me, they thought she was pretty and familiar but couldn’t place her name. Finally, I pulled into a country store and took their mail in and asked around. They recognised the country gal and thought she lived way to the other side of the county out where the bluffs ended and the flats began. After taking the rest of the mail on this part of the route seems like I drove half a hundred miles to put the Christmas card in the auburn haired woman’s mail box beside the road.

Her daughter, with the same auburn hair under a very used Farm Bureau ball cap, was waiting for the mail on the turnaround beside the road. The old F-250 pickup was beat to death like most old ranch trucks. A bale of hay and a couple salt blocks in the bed were doing worse for wear.

Chores to do. She took the mail and looked west. Hints of Irish red glinted through her uncollected hair as the sun went toward the next day. Our conversation wasn’t much. She said, “Yep, that’s us, thank you.” I wished her a Merry Christmas and drove back home.

Still waiting for my substitute driver check, but then again that’s what dreams are made of.

¡Feliz Navidad!

Travel well.
It’s a tradition like no other anywhere in the state of Colorado. It’s an event that defines who we are as people. It’s three days filled with the good things in life like homecomings, reunions, family fun, shopping, cheering, eating, laughing, community pride, and the best darn small-school basketball in the state.

It’s what helps make it “A Wonderful Life” for people in Southeastern Colorado during the holidays!

The Lamar Holiday Tournament was the brainchild of the Lamar Chamber of Commerce in 1964 when they decided to hold a basketball tournament that would draw in shoppers during the holiday season. Gary Peyton was the first tournament director and would hold that prestigious position for some 30 years. In a 2014 article by Aaron Leiker, Peyton explained why the Lamar Chamber started the tournament, “We had so many great teams in our area. We wanted to create a first-class tournament that felt like the state tournament. We knew so many teams in our area deserved to be at the state tournament, but never made it. The tournament gave them that feeling.” That was as true then as it is today.

The 1964 tournament, of course, consisted of a collection of eight boys’ teams. Girls did not play basketball in Colorado until the early to mid-1970s. The first tournament featured two brackets including the Single A (small school) bracket with Walsh, Crowley County, Springfield, and Cheyenne Wells, and the Triple AAA (large school) bracket that consisted of Lamar, La Junta, Las Animas, and Rocky Ford. In addition, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the tournament included a basketball clinic for all the players involved. Each year a well-known person in the national basketball community would instruct players before the tournament began. The clinics ended in 1975.

Jerry Bates, a lifetime Prowers County resident and veteran official of many sports, jumped on board to help Peyton in 1975.

Something else happened in 1975 that substantially improved the tournament and brought in even more fans than in previous Decembers. Girls teams were added, and Peyton assessed that, “The girls changed the tournament immediately.”

By 1980 a whole generation had played on the court in the Lamar Community Building and memories and traditions were being solidified. Year after year, fans would return to Lamar anticipating an electrifying atmosphere. There was an exuberance among the student athletes and their fans. No
individual better exemplified the spirit and enthusiasm felt at the Lamar Holiday Tournament each year than Melvin Hendrickson. Mel was a local man with Down’s Syndrome who was a sports enthusiast and loved to cheer for all the teams in the Holiday Tournament. In any given year, Mel would choose a favorite team, or two, and those young players would be honored to be on Mel’s side. He would happily and jauntily sweep the floors between games and help keep the spirit of Christmas alive in the building.

Sadly, Mel passed away in 1980. He was so cherished by that first generation of ball players that the Melvin Hendrickson Award was developed soon after his death. Since its conception, the award has gone to former players, administrators, coaches, and others who share that same spirit, enthusiasm, and support for student athletes from all
over Southeast Colorado.

A new tournament director team was named in the early 1990s when Rick Akers and Dave Reyher took the reins. They didn’t change much as they felt the tournament was already a crowning achievement. They believed their role was a matter of maintaining what was already unique about the tournament.

It was unique in so many ways, but as the sport of basketball goes, it was akin to the level of competition and skills seen at the state tournament each year. According to Reyher, “The experience of playing in this tournament was going to be a once in a lifetime experience for participants, and in many ways the closest they would get to playing in a state tournament-like atmosphere.”

In fact, the entire state now realizes that time and time again it will be the winners at the Lamar Holiday Tournament in December who finish the highest, sometimes at the very top, at the state tournament in March.

Reyer and Akers did add a few little twists and perks to the tournament as they introduced the well-known and anticipated commemorative tee shirts as part of the tournament experience. In recent years, each player and coach in the tournament...
receives a specially designed tee shirt. There is a new design each year. Many players and coaches love to collect and wear those tees, and to most they are truly items to cherish. It’s something the players, year after year, have in common.

The modern era of the tournament emerged in 2010 when Chad DeBono and Dr. Sean Oquist took over as tournament directors. They have continued on with the much-cherished traditions connected to the tournament. A few new attractions have emerged during this era. Both are unique ideas that brings rivals from all the schools together in celebration. First, the cheerleaders from the eight schools involved in the tournament perform a dance routine, to Christmas music, of course, on Championship Saturday night. The dance allows all the small towns to come together cheering for a common pride in their youth.

Another unique tradition that has recently been formed was a grassroots event created by tournament alumni Tyndan and Traeongon Marquez called the “Ugly Christmas Sweater Day.” Group pictures are taken as the ugliest sweater is chosen. The event has resulted in bringing fun and Christmas spirit to the tournament. Rivals from years gone by come together to celebrate their friendship, the tournament, and the holiday season.

The tournament is, of course, at its simplest level, about the student athletes and their excitement to get an opportunity to play for their school, in front of more than 1,500 people each day, in the most electrifying atmosphere found on the plains of Colorado. They dream of playing in the championship in front of a packed house on Saturday night.

Those 1,500 fans show up in their school colors—purple, red, yellow, green, white, black, blue—and brighten up the gym like a traditional Christmas tree with hundreds of glittering and multi-colored lights.

By now, grandparents who were once the players on the court, are coming to watch their grandchildren play in the tournament. They share a common bond of small town community as it continues on through the generations.

Perhaps Oquist summed it up the best upon taking over the tournament, “It is a very special event being so close to Christmas. It is a homecoming with families, siblings, classmates, rivals, and basketball fans. Everyone comes back for this thing. It is a big part of the wonderful life we live in south-eastern Colorado.”
Some time back, we had the occasion and privilege to visit with some folks quite often who used to live in this country. They were the children of the homesteaders or early settlers. They were the children who were born on and lived here on these prairies through the earliest part of their lives. They were the children who romped, frolicked and were happy, most having no clue to the difficulty, punishment, very hard times and poor state of their parents’ lives. These were the children that the silent song of the prairie crept in, took root in their soul, and after many, many years, they could not let go of their memories of those long ago times and wanted to return to that meager existence one last time so they might walk among the rocks and ruins of their childhood homes that are slowly melting into the ground. They wished to reminisce and recall these things before they, too, would return to the soil. Like the soldiers of the “Great War”, they are all gone now, but they would trickle into the ranch wanting directions to their long ago abode and that hardscrabble existence on the dryland.

Karen and I got to thinking, wouldn’t it be great if all these dear people could be together at the same time so they could visit, laugh and reminisce with each other. Some who wouldn’t have seen their friend, neighbors and schoolmates for fifty or sixty years since their families moved away with their broken dreams during the great drought and depression of the late twenties and early thirties seeking a better life. We could take them around to their homesteads because most wouldn’t know how to get there.

Thus was born the “Handsprings Rendezvous” and “Antelope School Reunion” of October 1986. Many folks of course we couldn’t come up with an address or phone number, but, of those we contacted, they came from six states to the rendezvous and Antelope School reunion from as far away as Oregon, ranging in age from probably sixty on up to 95. We took a picture of fourteen “kids” and three teachers that went to Antelope School. How is that percentagewise for a little country school that probably never averaged more than 8 to 10 or 12 kids per year?! One of those “kids” that came to the get together was Eva DeHaven Hoggett. As a matter of fact, Eva and her family lived right here at Handsprings for several years—the kids going to Antelope School. I suppose her father helped PG Scott who homesteaded Handsprings in 1884 and was the only other owner besides the Hasser family.

Anyway, Eva told us the following Christmas story—the year was 1918.

One evening, a stranger came riding in and ask if he could spend the night. The DeHavens of course said he could, and he could stay over in the bunk house. The stranger ended up staying all winter. Mrs. DeHaven ask him one time where he came from, which was a no no, but he told her “from a long ways off”. He did tell her his name was Liman, though—which was another no no. People just didn’t ask a stranger his business, where he came from, his name even, unless a cowpoke volunteered such information. Eva said her mother invited him over to eat a meal with them once in a while as all he had to eat over in the bunkhouse was oatmeal. It was almost Christmas 1918. It might have been cold and snowing on the outside,
but it was warm and cozy in the little two room rock house when Mr. DeHaven put up a Christmas tree that to little 6 year old Eva seemed as big as the Christmas tree now to her at the White House. As mentioned above in this writing, just about everyone on the dryland was poor. Not expecting much for Christmas was probably the norm and the way of life for most dryland kids. On Christmas morning, Liman came over from the bunkhouse. He had a present for the two little DeHaven girls. A yard of red ribbon for little six year old Eva and a yard of blue ribbon for her sister, Mabel. He also gave them an orange a piece. They were to always remember the stranger who gave them a Christmas gift, rather than buy himself something to eat besides oatmeal. Eva said some 68 years later, that was the Christmas she remembers above all the other fancy ones since—the cowboy who held two little dryland girls in his heart.

Come spring, the DeHaven family woke up one morning to find the stranger gone. I think perhaps Eva and Mabel DeHaven held the cowboy who they didn’t know where he came from or where he went in their heart until their passing.

Eva wrote me a letter (sometime after our gathering here) asking if I would scatter her ashes on the big rock bluff above the spring where she used to play as a little girl—of course I said yes. Another man ask permission to scatter his father’s ashes on their old homestead here on the ranch, also. The third one—another lady ask if I would take her to the old homestead where her mother grew up because her mother had requested that her ashes be scattered there. With tears in her eyes, the daughter threw the ashes in the air and a velvet breeze gently settled them to the ground where her mother played as a child over sixty some years ago.

What is the mystery of these prairies that holds the heart and soul captive in these good people for well over a half a century?

Yes, we will remember these folks, the children of the prairie and their love affair with the land they grew up in, and yes, we will also remember Eva’s Christmas Story.

George Gotto has many things in common with George Bailey, the main character in the beloved classic holiday film, *It's a Wonderful Life*. Of course, they have the same name. They both were bankers for many years. Even more interesting, they both dream of traveling to see the world. But deeper than that is the generous and unselfish way they live their lives.

George Gotto is a gentle, quiet man who has a twinkle in his eye. By December of each year, his long white beard has grown out, and his red suit and black boots come out of the closet.

On a chilly day in late November, it was my pleasure to sit down with George and his wife, Anna Mae, in their home in Lamar. Anna Mae was surrounded by dozens of Santas, twinkle lights, Christmas trees, and an array of ornaments, ribbon, and trim. She was decorating their home for Christmas as this year is even more special than usual.

"George signed us up for the Zonta Club's Christmas Parade of Homes Tour this year," she says, "against my knowledge, I might add." She turns her playful glare on George who is sitting in his easy chair.

George just smiles and agrees. "Around the Gotto house, Christmas is the very best time of year," he says.

It's a perfect setting to talk to Southeastern Colorado’s famous Santa Claus. We sit by the fireplace, Anna Mae in her chair and George in his easy chair, petting his beloved dog who rests contently on his lap.

Anna Mae Stout, born and raised in the Wiley area, met George in college at Fort Collins. George was a military brat, and, by the time the two met, George had lived all over the world. Before long, they were married. Eventually, George signed up for service in the Army during the Vietnam era. They lived in Germany where their eldest child was born. George was in Military Intelligence from 1965-1968.

After the war, the Gottos moved to southeastern Colorado where George settled in his work years which included 25 years at Lamar Building Material Supply, the concrete business for 13 years, and, finally, as a banker for another 13 years. He’s been retired for three years.

George became Santa Claus in 1983. The December before, Anna Mae saw a Santa suit on a clearance table at Montgomery Wards and bought it for a fun anniversary present. George said the thought of becoming Santa Clause started to grow

"You see, George, you really do have a wonderful life"

By BETSY BARNETT
on him. “I was in a men’s Bible study group in Wiley and the pastor asked us to name somebody we’d like to be from the past. I piped up immediately, ‘Santa Claus’, without even thinking about it.”

When asked why Santa Claus, George replied, “Everybody loves Santa Claus. People are always happy, always glad to see you.”

Even though becoming Santa Claus that first year was out of his comfort zone, Anna Mae urged him to follow his dream. “George had a brown beard at that time, so we used white shoe polish. His beard miraculously turned white, and he really looked like Santa Claus.”

Since then, George Gotto has transformed into Santa Claus each and every December for a total of 35 years.

“Actually, Eads was where I first became Santa Claus,” George recalls. “John and Deby Courkamp got me involved with their Chamber’s annual Chili Supper where Santa comes to visit. I’ll usually see 100-150 kids there in Eads. It seems like there are more and more each year. It’s become a tradition.”

He goes on to add, “Granada is another one I do every year. They have the end of the year music program in the community building and they always have a huge Christmas tree. That’s the night I probably see the most children because they’re all there after their program. I usually see 200 or 250 there.” He ticks off other performances. “I go to Haswell. Been to Towner and Plainview. Elkhart, Kansas is usually my first visit of the year. They usually do it in the middle of November. I’ve visited Holly many times. I do the McClave School – the Wiley School.”

Anna Mae chimes in, reminding Santa George of all the events he does in Lamar, including the Parade of Lights, the Preschool, the Wash Spott, the Enchanted Forest. One of his favorites is the Rotary Christmas at the Shore Arts Center during the weekend of the Lamar Holiday Basketball
“At that one, Mae dresses up as Mrs. Claus,” he says with a wink.
Mae smiles. “It’s the only one I do—and I do it under protest.”

One very special annual visit is to the Southeast Developmental Services Christmas for mentally challenged children and adults. “Some of those folks I’ve seen for 15 years. It’s always a joyous occasion. The people are always delighted to see Santa. They’re genuinely happy and outgoing. I really look forward to that one.” He goes on to add, “It’s nice to go where you’re so welcomed. One of those places is in Haswell. They have a community pot luck in the gym of the school. I’ll come in after they finish up eating and greet the people. Then I’ll sit by their tree and people will bring up their children. Sometimes there’s only 1 or 2 children at Haswell, but last year there were 10-12.”

George even does Christmas Eve visits for 5-6 local families who book him to visit their parties each and every year. They’re fun family traditions that George looks forward to. “I have some families that I started being Santa Claus for when the children were infants, and now they’re teenagers.” He laughs, “They still want to sit on my lap!”

Anna Mae, who is in charge of George’s suit and takes great pride in the authenticity of his appearance, says it amazes her that, when George is in costume, he’s no longer George but somehow transitions into a real life Santa Claus. However, not everyone is fooled.

Anna Mae tells the story of the time their family was preparing for their annual Christmas photo when two year old grandson, Mark, ran up to his mother, yelling, “Mama, mama, Grandpa turned into Santa Claus!”

Both George and Anna Mae grew quiet at remembering one tradition with Santa Claus that is now gone forever. “Throughout the years, Ruthie (Esgar) at Bettianne’s took pictures each year of every single child that sat on my lap. Bettianne’s was always my favorite place to go. I was usually there over two Sundays. Over 20 years, the same crowd kept coming over and over. Kids would come back well into their teens for their annual photo.” George pauses. “But now Ruthie is gone.” Anna Mae adds, “And George (Temple), too.”

But new traditions have opened up. For instance, the Wash Spott in Lamar brings Santa to the area, and the same photos are taken during the event that Ruthie provided so many years prior. George says he is still blessed to work with friends
from the Wiley and Lamar area each year.

“Now people are starting to book him in June and July to ensure Santa can make his traditional visit. Right now, he has 18 different events scheduled. Usu-ally by the end of December, he’ll have done somewhere around 30 visits.”

It’s estimated that, each December, George welcomes more than a thousand children to sit on his lap and tell him their secret wishes for Christmas. Multiply that by nearly four decades of Santa Claus events, and it’s safe to surmise that George Goto knows a lot about being Santa and the magical world of a child.

When George began to fill the role of Santa Claus, like many young men he was struggling with the concept of who he was. Who did he want to be? Others try to portray a tough image, but, for him, the kind, thoughtful and loving Santa Claus represented the kind of person he wanted to be. “I was very introverted and uncomfortable in public settings. But, through my years as Santa Claus, I’ve overcome that and learned how to communicate with children and adults alike.” He goes on to add, “With children, especially, I’ve learned to be gentle, to be quiet, to not make sudden movements. People always want me to ‘Ho, Ho, Ho,’ but children are cautious, and some are uncomfortable. So, I encourage the parents to let the child down and to watch others and become comfortable with me in the room. A lot of times, if parents give the child enough time, they’ll be my best buddy.”

Sometimes, it helps to show them the reindeer sleigh bells he brings along to each and every event. “Their sound is magical, and the children are drawn to them,” adds Anna Mae who bought the bells for George at an antique store in Kansas.

Then there are the rules Santa sets for himself in order to be a good role model for the children. Some rules he always keeps. “Santa doesn’t smoke, Santa doesn’t drink,” he says as that twinkle appears in his eye. “Although there’s lots of days I’d really like to drink!”

Mrs. Claus adds, “Santa never brings war toys or guns.” Yes, they confirm that some children have asked for real guns. “I always ask them questions like, ‘What are you going to do with that?’ We have some philosophical discussions sometimes.”

George goes on to add, “You don’t think they’re aware what’s going on with the adults in their lives.” Sometimes, the requests are just heartbreaking. “They ask me to get their parents back together, or to quit fighting. They ask for their dad
to get out of prison. They ask to protect their dad who is a soldier. They’re honest and open about it because they believe in the magic of Santa Claus.”

George then gets a soft look on his face. “Some of the children are truly giving,” he says. “Those don’t ask for anything for themselves. They ask for things for their brother or sister. Some children are very affectionate. They snuggle. They hug me. There’s no reluctance at all. I really enjoy the fact that I’m a special part of their holiday season.”

George does not accept payment for his appearances. “But,” George adds, “people still give me things as they feel guilty. I strongly feel that it’s important for people to learn to just receive a gift and simply say, ‘thank you.’” He goes on to add, “The giving spirit and the act of volunteerism is getting lost in the fast shuffle of our lives. It’s because, for the most part, people think they should be paid for their time these days.”

Over the years people are constantly gifting George with Santa Claus. Now he collects them. “I have 200 or so. I love them all, but we have so many we can’t put them all out.” He also has several paintings of Santa Claus. “My father was an artist and he painted me pictures of Santa Clauses from 27 different countries before he died. They were usually a Christmas gift.”

George then went down stairs and came back up with a box full of paintings. He and Anna Mae went through the colorful paintings one by one reading the information hand written on the back describing where the Santa came from and the traditions involving the Santa.

“He painted them from antique Christmas postcards through the years. Mom and Dad loved to go into antique stores and find new Santas. Dad would find a new Santa and buy the card and then paint the image from the card.”

For years, the amazing collection of Santa paintings were put on display at Christmas in the bank lobby, a tradition that’s been discontinued because
they don’t have the room. But, as stated earlier, this year is special; they are in the home tour, so they are bringing out all the Santas. People who visit the Gotto house are sure to be charmed at the art work that will be on display.

Over the years, the role of Santa seems to have expanded as George grows more and more familiar with the part. As Anna Mae explains, “George has a St. Nicholas suit that he wears to do a program explaining the multifaceted Santa traditions of the various countries.”

George adds, “Thanks to Anna Mae I have 9 different suits. Some aren’t traditional. One makes me look like a Catholic Cardinal. I use it at church presentations to tie Santa to the church. I tell them Santa was born in Turkey. He was a Bishop in the Church. Coca Cola has made the Americanized image of Santa, but in the Old World Santa looks more like a Catholic Bishop.” He goes on to add, “One year, Santa actually wore a black suit. It was during the depression.”

Anna Mae jumps in. “There’s one of George entitled ‘Small Town Santa Claus’ that has a Wiley banner painted into the scene. I think it looks a lot like George.”

“I don’t know which one I like the best,” says
George, “There’s some I lean to more.” He points to a few including one with a small reindeer, another showing a polar bear, and a Santa riding a white horse.

George says holding up a painting, “Santa actually was an elf during the year until the night before Christmas.”

At the end of our conversation Santa and Mrs. Claus pulled out the Santa suit George will be visiting the children in this year. George laid out the red suit, the sleigh bells, and most definitely he did not forget the tall black boots.

“When they see me in my Santa costume, they’re always respectful and usually subdued. They look me over intently. I have a real beard and a high-quality suit. But the best thing evidently about my Santa suit are the boots. Those are the most important of all.”

Anna Mae confirms, “One of the little boys in Eads was having trouble believing Santa was real. Another little boy assured him, ‘I know he’s really Santa!’”

His skeptical friend asked, “How do you know?”

The answer, of course, was obvious, “He’s got on real boots!”

Well, that’s about all there is to say about the authenticity of the southeastern Colorado Santa Claus. Of course, above all, he wears real boots.

George and Anna Mae Gotto have the tendency to prompt one to reflect on what is truly important in life. Obviously, they are both quite educated and could have made a great amount of money in their lifetime. They could have spent every Christmas traveling to keep up with their children’s families. They could have traveled the world. But, just as George Bailey did, George Gotto decided long ago to give his life to the children of southeastern Colorado.

In the infamous words of Harry Bailey from the movie “It’s a Wonderful Life”, “A toast! To George! The richest man in town!”

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