



Bob Edgar

(July 27, 1939 - April 20, 2012)

One of the last chapters of the American Old West closed Friday evening April 20, 2012, with the passing of Bob Edgar, 72, of Cody, founder of the Old Trail Town frontier museum and an internationally acclaimed historian and archaeologist. If the iconic western gentleman had need of a proper resumé, it would have also included artist, author, sharpshooter and firearms specialist, hunting guide and trapper, naturalist and conservationist (and along the way, destroyer of Jeeps in the line of duty).

Bob Edgar was destined to be a historian; the aggregator of the Old West that Cody, so dearly hung its hat on. While the community of Cody diverted much of its energy in promoting its western image through rodeo and the growing Buffalo Bill Historical Center art institution, Bob Edgar chose to capture the real substance and edifices of the pre-1900 Old West and put new foundations under them. By recovering the artifacts of the past while they still existed and giving them a new home and extended life at Old Trail Town, Bob Edgar assured the history of northwest Wyoming all the way back to the Ice Ages and earliest peoples will be experienced by generations to come.

The greatest tool in Bob Edgar's toolbox for recovering the West was to become that West along his storied way. Few would doubt that Bob Edgar was the real live image of the American West before automobiles and airplanes. The veracity and dedication of his life's work went far beyond the fables, the fictional accounts, and the faux Western constructs of Hollywood and Madison Avenue to deliver the real American West using its bones and grist, gunpowder and charcoal, its dark leathers and black iron, its handhewn woods and mud chinks as built by forgotten men with stone tools or forged axe and tempered by Bob Edgar's selfless toil to edify it again.

Cody folks have been blessed with the best of two possible "Western" worlds ... a veritable Smithsonian institution of the art and academics of the West at the BBHC, and just three minutes away a living Williamsburg-like frontier village bursting with history that is but one step removed. If the BBHC is the cerebral artistic and professorial experience, Bob Edgar's Old Trail Town is the salt of the earth. Trail Town can be experienced with all five senses, also in a scholarly way where frontier life becomes art of its own volition.

The trail to Trail Town was a long and winding travail, and not always a happy trail, however. Robert Wilburn Edgar was the firstborn of Paul G. Edgar and Marjorie (Downer) Edgar, delivered by midwife on July 27, 1939, at their rustic home at the base of Polecat Bench

northeast of Powell, Wyo. An early love of the outdoors and awareness of local history was infused into young Bob and his brother Larry at a very early age when the family resided at the small oilfield company camptown in Oregon Basin. Paul Edgar, who was part Comanche Indian, was an oilfield production man for the Ohio Oil Company, Husky Oil, and eventually Marathon Oil companies. Bob and Larry spent countless hours in the sandstone and cedar breaks of the Badlands, having little want or need of the slow glimmer of Cody town till the family moved there in 1950 with younger sister Helen and soon kid brother Dave, completing the Edgar family. Paul commuted to the oil patch while Marjorie operated her successful home interior and furnishing business in Cody till they retired. Bob and Larry retreated to the sagebrush and ridgelines as often as possible. Bob was educated in the Cody public schools, graduating Cody high School with honors in 1957 and attending fledgling Northwest Community College in Powell to study art and archaeology, receiving an Associates Degree in 1961. In a parallel educational track, Bob was already an accomplished hunter and trapper by the time he left high school, employed by outfitters, and dived deeply into the lore and functionality of firearms. Outside the classroom Bob went about learning important skills about horsecraft and by virtue of a service station job, maintaining Jeeps, not that the latter did him much good since he destroyed three of them in the line of duty. It wasn't the Jeeps' fault.

While at NWCC in 1960, Bob painted a large mural of the school's "Trapper" mascot in the personage of mountain man John Colter who was a member of the famed Lewis & Clark Expedition of 1805-06. Colter went off on his own and became the first Anglo to see northwest Wyoming and Yellowstone. As serendipity would have it, just five years later Bob Edgar gestated Old Trail Town across the river from the geothermal area known as "Colters Hell " on the west edge of Cody. Colter the mountain man most certainly walked the grounds of Trail Town's future location and the site of Bob Edgar's own family home and the hub of his lifelong historical legacy. Bob Edgar would walk in many historic footfalls. Bob had inquired about a lonely primitive one room cabin way out west of Cody above the Demaris "Bronze Boot" hot springs that was owned by a colorful worldly gentleman named Bill de Maris, the town's founder and icon. Demaris owned a lot of property thereabouts, subdivided on paper, including one lot off the highway with the little cabin moved into town there from Vic Arland's c. 1878 trading post on Cottonwood Creek a few miles due north of present day Cody by German sculptor named Winold Wreiss in 1935 for his studio, but it had been unoccupied for years. DeMaris leased it to Bob for \$1.00 per year to make it legal. It had no electricity or running water. Acquaintances of Bob at the time recalled he would extinguish to lone candle that illuminated the interior with his. 22 pistol.

Bob had been taken by a very attractive waitress new to Cody from Texas, Janice Birchfield, and married her in 1959. They later divorced after having two daughters, Cathy and Susan. Jan was tragically killed in a car accident near Meeteetse. Bob became enamored once again, this time with Terry Deutch of Sheridan whom he married and she moved into the Arland cabin with him, and they had a daughter of their own, Sherri Lynn Edgar, who only ever knew Trail Town as home. Such were the humble beginnings of Old Trail Town and the personal touchstones of Bob Edgar's life. In his self-made career, Bob Edgar received many awards and accolades, accruing a long list of national and international recognition from the Smithsonian Institution all the way

down to local service clubs and everything in between: Governor's awards, state archaeological society awards and serving as Vice President of same, NWCC Distinguished Alumni, American Travel Writer's "Phoenix" award for distinguished conservation, serving on the state of Wyoming BLM advisory board, and many other meritorious accolades and media kudos that Bob was too humble to record as they came over the transom on a regular basis.

Among other virtues, Bob Edgar did not seem to have the word "No" in his lexicon. He was by example the embodiment of a true western gentleman, and lived up to the Cowboy Code of courtesy and generosity to a fault. Bad words seldom issued from Bob Edgar's lips, and when they did were either well deserved or in a purely historical context. Bob was often asked to speak formally, sometimes in high places such as the gilded Westerner's Club in Chicago which he did, but was much more gratified doing show and tells to schoolkids in Meeteetse or Cody or anywhere within driving range. Magazine writers appreciated the wellspring of Bob Edgar's work and countless pages were generated in publications at home and abroad. If the topic was the American West, Bob was on the contact short list, but the unspoken truth was the writers and reporters wanted as much as anything to see him shoot his Colt 45 pistols with the accuracy of a neurosurgeon.

Bob Edgar became a world class sharpshooter, being gifted with extraordinary eyesight and hand control plus an intimate knowledge of projectile weaponry. Years of practice and hundreds of thousands of spent rounds honed his skills to the confidence level of being able to shoot objects from people's mouths and hands at 40 paces with the deadly force of a Colt 45. Folks honestly were not considered to be on the social register in Cody unless they had something tactly blown off an appendage by Bob Edgar's pistol at some point. Or put another way, Bob was one of the few men in America who shot a heavy caliber handgun directly at his own wife (Terry) thousands of times and got away with it. Law Enforcement often looked the other way when Bob did some late night sport shooting in downtown Cody or Meeteetse, autographing buildings with bullets (but only when asked). One night outside the back of the Irma Hotel in Cody, Bob was monogramming a playing card for a bar patron who held it up against a wooden utility pole to capture the bullet. The target card was summarily and safely holed, but the bullet killed the electricity in the immediate area including the Cody Police Department station a half block away. Prudence prevented Bob from copping to that ...Yet Trail Town stood on the brink of doom four times due to horrendous legal issues and an irresolute marriage, and another time it nearly burned to the ground when a group of US Cavalry re-enactors camped just west by the Cody Stampede rodeo grounds touched off a cannon and the sparks ignited a prairie fire that nearly consumed the buildings and contents on July 3, 1993.

In a cruel twist of fate, with those legal battles behind him and the road ahead for Trail Town clear for the first time ever, Bob's health began failing at the same time. Back when he was 18 years old, Bob had a defective kidney removed and lived the remainder of his life with one kidney, ignoring doctor's advice to take it easy and treat his body gently. Bob did not treat his body gently ... he was a physically strong man and engaged the world around him with great vigor, hard work, keeping impossible hours on countless forays into the wild.

Once while guiding an elk hunter in the Thorofare, he jumped over a fallen tree only to land squarely with both boots on the back of a snoozing black bear in its day bed. Another time while shooting a .45 Colt handgun alone, the cylinder exploded and drove shrapnel into his leg and arms, probably the only time in the hundreds of thousands of rounds he fired from guns that human bodily harm was done. Yet another time while doing log skinning work alone, he accidentally tore open his leg with a drawknife and nearly bled to death.

Bob survived a nasty bout of tularemia (also called Rabbit Fever) when young, but as a middle aged man he began having mini-strokes (transient ischemic attacks, or TIA), no doubt exacerbated by reduced kidney function and his general adamance to lighten up the stress he was inflicting on his own body from his rugged lifestyle and the physical work of wrangling whole buildings. To a fault Bob was averse to seeing doctors or even taking common OTC pain relievers, preferring "Cowboy Up Medicine" and/or 'horse doctoring' for the more serious aches, pains and contusions, of which there were quite a few. A faulty propane heater in a camp trailer at the Pitchfork Ranch in the mid-90's left Bob unconscious for an indeterminate amount of time, and it is speculated this may have accelerated the onset of his crippling dementia.

Although he hid it well, it became obvious by the turn of the millennia that Bob's mental faculties were slowly deteriorating, becoming acute from ~2005 on and leaving him bedridden without the ability to speak in more recent years. Dementia claimed him in the spring of his 72nd year, with so much of his life's work undone, but with few if any regrets.

Bob Edgar was a lifelong resident of the western Big Horn Basin of Wyoming and became its chronicler of pre-1900 life there, both on paper and in selflessly preserving the physical heritage. He seemed born to a destiny of both preserving the history and living it. His life and his work merged seamlessly.

There were far too many projects or collaborations in Bob Edgar's professional life to list here, but a few major milestones stand out. In 1960-63, Edgar and George Dabich scoured the entire state of Wyoming, inventorying and mapping Paleo-Indian archaeological sites at the behest of the Buffalo Bill Historical Center's first director, Dr. Harold McCracken, himself a world renowned researcher, explorer, and old-school naturalist who secured Smithsonian, National Geographic Society, and private funding to endow Edgar's position as the BBHC's Director of Archaeologic Survey and Excavations from 1960-67.

Edgar and Dabich assisted by Larry Edgar were the principal excavators of the Mummy Cave project 35 miles west of Cody near the mouth of Blackwater Creek beginning in 1963 before the project was joined by the Smithsonian's Dr. Waldo Wedell. Mummy Cave yielded an unbroken archaeological and climatological record going back over 9,000 years, including the discovery of a very well preserved pre-Columbian human mummy, obviously a man of some esteem and buried with a treasure trove of possessions who was interred around 1250 years previously, some 750 years before Columbus sailed and 350 years before modern Plains Indian tribes moved into the Absaroka-Yellowstone region. Mummy Cave became an encyclopedia of

aboriginal life in the Rocky Mountains.

Of the myriad events that occurred at Trail Town, the pinnacle came in June 1974 when the remains of John "Liver Eatin'" Johnston -- Civil War veteran, mountain man, and former Sheriff of Red Lodge Montana -- were reburied at trail Town, beginning the pioneer cemetery that today holds seven notable frontier characters. Johnston was the real life model for the 1972 Robert Redford film "Jeremiah Johnston" a semi-fictional screenplay based on Vardis Fisher's biography "Crow Killer." Redford himself came to Cody to act as pallbearer for the man he portrayed onscreen, whose grave was in danger of being lost to a freeway project in Lancaster California. Bob Edgar had taken an interest in Johnston's life and offered Trail Town as a permanent home for the storied mountain man. Truth be told, Redford and Cody artist James Bama paid the extraneous expenses of the reburial, anonymously, even as reporters descended on Cody and news accounts of the Reburial of Liver Eatin' Johnston saturated the global media. This event established Trail Town's reputation as a storehouse of Old West history in the larger world outside of Cody Wyoming, and many more film, television, and print media events only added to that media legacy, and continue to this day. Bob Edgar has done countless on-camera interviews over the years. A pilot of a western genre movie, "Absaroka" was filmed at Trail Town and the nearby mountains in 2008. Trail Town with its frontier countenance has served for countless community events, gatherings and presentations, more than a few weddings, and musical performances.[Trail Town website is www.oldtrailtown.org]

On 1982 a most curious chain of events drew Bob Edgar into yet another sensational national news splash involving the Old West. A psychic in Virginia named Virginia Mauricio claimed the spirit of a Crow Indian chief was contacting her and wanted to go home to his people. While skeptical, Bob organized a forensic archaeological search in the sandstone rims above the Whit Ranch west of Meeteetse, owing to his research of other Native American burial sites in the immediate area and the specificity of the psychic's vision. Miraculously (or not), the splendorous bundle burial of the great Crow chief Blackfoot were found by 17-year old Willie Plainfeather, son of Crow historian Plain Feather who lived to be 100. Chief Blackfoot (Kam-Ne-But-Sa) was born in the Absaroka Mountains in 1795 and rose to Chief of all Chiefs of the Crow people, having the wisdom to keep his tribe out of the Indian Wars and away from the US Army by signing the Laramie treaty of 1868 which gave the Crow people hunting and fishing rights and passage, in exchange for neutrality. Under Bob Edgar's direction, Blackfoot's remains were carefully excavated, and the Chief reburied with full tribal honors. Truth be told, Bob Edgar had a propensity for unburying Old West personalities to rebury them at Trail town. To wit: from the Palette 1 Ranch on the Greybull River, Phillip Vetter, a settler who was killed by a grizzly bear but not after writing a death note in his own blood; Jim White, one of the most notable of the buffalo hunters; William Gallagher and Blind Bill Houlihan found on Meeteetse Creek were two bonafide gunslinger 1880's outlaws involved in a love triangle at the notorious town of Arland now ghosted; Belle Drury, soiled dove from early Meeteetse ; and Jack Stillwell, Civil War veteran and frontiersman -- all have joined Liver Eatin' Johnston in Trail Town's firmament. Whether Bob was acting as a historian, forensic archaeologist, mortician, or graverobber when moving these deceased folks around is a matter of some speculation, but the graves of Gallagher, Blind Bill, and Vetter would have been obliterated by backhoes or hydrology and the

rest forgotten had Bob not relocated them.

A recurring theme in Bob Edgar's life is his association with the area around Meeteetse, especially the huge Pitchfork Ranch begun by Count Otto Franc von Lichtenstein in 1878, the first of the large consolidated cattle ranches in northwest Wyoming, pencilling out at nearly 300,000 acres at its apex after WWII before the family divided it into the Pitchfork proper and 91 Ranches and spun off the bar TL to the lawyer handling the deal.

Bob Edgar struck a lasting friendship with Pitchfork ranch manager Cal Todd in the 1960's while guiding and hunting the Greybull River, eventually becoming what amounted to a surrogate member of the Phelps-Belden family dynasty that owned the Pitchfork. Bob became the ranch's hunting manager in 1968, taking over the wrangling of hundreds of hunters in search of Pronghorn, deer, and even a few elk from the Pitchfork every autumn while the ranch was entirely busy with roundup, weaning, pasturing and shipping, and remained hunting manager for nearly 30 years in an active big game conservation partnership with Cal Todd who cashed out and left the ranch in the early 70's and later Jack Turnell, husband to Charles Belden granddaughter Frances "Lili" Abarr who managed the Pitchfork till the turn of the next century.

Noted American historical fiction author James Michener and his team researched the Pitchfork Ranch for Michener's 1976 opus "Centennial" based on a fictional Colorado cattle ranch and dynasty that had a strong resemblance to the Meeteetse Pitchfork pantheon and setting. Edgar and Turnell did it one better when in 1978 they co-authored "Brand of a Legend," a history of the Pitchfork, Meeteetse, the outlaw ghost town of Arland and the Greybull River country from late Pleistocene to the present day for the ranch's 100th anniversary.

The following year, the duo published a book about the Wyoming woolgrower's heritage centered on the Lucy and Lincoln Morrison family of the Wind River Basin. Lucy became known as the "Sheep Queen of Wyoming" and was a distant relative of Turnell's.

Bob Edgar had always intended to write a much more comprehensive history of the Big Horn Basin and derived his portion of the Pitchfork and shepherding books -- from Prehistoric times till the close of the 19th century -- as seedstock. Regrettably, that seed never took stock before Bob lost his writing ability, yet he still left behind thousands of pages of handwritten accounts and research at Trail Town that has barely been sifted, grist for future historians and the next Micheners. Bob also assisted many other authors with their own scholarly works on facets of Wyoming history and archaeology.

It was Edgar's association with the Pitchfork that provided a core building block for Old Trail Town. The Belden family retained an impressive collection of Plains Indian artifacts and beaded clothing and many historical items that Otto Franc had acquired from the estate of early Greybull River aristocratic rancher Richard Ashworth when he bought him out to create the Z Bar T ranch headquarters five miles up from Franc's own place. When Cal and Margot Belden Todd were divesting themselves of the Pitchfork, they endowed Bob Edgar's nascent Old Trail Town with a fireproof building and display cases to house the Ashworth collection, which is now

the centerpiece of the exhibits.

During his heyday, Bob Edgar was perhaps better known in Meeteetse on a per capita basis than even Cody, and eventually acquired a cabin on some property up Meeteetse Creek. Bob is best remembered in Meeteetse for adding to the venerable Cowboy Bar's decor with an assortment of interior bullet holes.

Edgar was able to recover and reassemble some 22 original frontier buildings for Trail Town, from tiny one room cabins all the way up to entire mercantile stores, doing it one log and one beam at a time. Most notable is the "Hole in the Wall" cabin used by Butch Cassidy's gang, moved here from near Kaycee Wyoming. As Trail Town evolved, Bob began populating a conjectural main street with buildings to resemble a town of the late 1800's. The Henry Rivers Saloon from the mouth of the Wood River c. 1888 was the second structure and still serves drinks and hosts card games on occasion. The post office from the earliest town in the western Big Horn Basin, called Bonanza, from over on the Nowood River is there. The Burlington Store, the Rice Ranch commissary, the original Shell, Wyo., store, a grainery, livery stable, George Taggart's carpenter's shop, and a complete blacksmith shop all from the 1890's, and an ancient trapper's cabin are there along with the log home of the first Mayor of Cody from 1897. Trail Town actually sits on the location where the original town of Cody was platted.

Completing the roster of edifices are a few one room residence cabins belonging to buffalo hunters, Custer's Indian scout Curley, some homestead cabins, and a one room schoolhouse replete with desks and school supplies, plus a faux-frontier barn style building Bob built to house some of the wheeled coaches and provide a workshop area and occasional gathering hall. The outlier of Trail Town is littered with more than 100 wooden vehicles, wagons, and implements of various sorts, with a bronze sculpture Mountain Man memorial garden. Oldtime rodeo cowboy Floyd Stillings was buried out back in 1997 at a remarkable gathering of living cowboys of renown, and Buffalo Bill's grandson Bill Garlow Cody's ashes were scattered there also.

However, many of Bob Edgar's long term plans for Trail Town never came to pass, including a large circular log building fashioned after a round mountain lodge built to resemble a 3D Medicine Wheel, intended to house his growing Pre-Columbian artifacts collections. It is something of a shame that Edgar was distracted by legal issues and a dissolving marriage that siphoned away much of the energy and time needed to advance the work of physical history. Trail Town teetered on the abyss no less than four times in its own history when Bob's altruism in running the place as a gift to the public on meager cash donations clashed head on with larger well-heeled interests and their attorneys, a divorce, and unforeseen expenses. No less than two BBHC trustees or operatives, the executor of the Stock Foundation (and himself BBHC legal counselor), the City of Cody, and the sale of half the financial interest in Trail Town to a Wall Street executive by Bob's estranged wife all threatened to implode Trail Town in darkness and ruin. Thankfully, all that passed by, including a seven-year-long legal battle with the latter, and Trail Town is now fully a 501(c) 3 nonprofit foundation, The Museum of the Old West, with an assured future as far as anyone can see. It is a regrettable twist of fate that just as Trail

Town's legal and financial battles were won. Bob Edgar's health began to fail him and his productive years were cut short.

Robert Wilburn Edgar was preceded in death by his parents Paul and Marjorie Edgar, his first wife Janice "Jan" Birchfield Edgar and second wife Terry Deutch Edgar, and niece Cori Edgar. Bob Edgar was also preceded in death by three Jeeps, several 3/4 ton truck engines, and a few hundred thousand spent ammo cartridges. Survivors include brother Larry Downer (Jan) Edgar of Meeteetse and his children Jim (Nicolette) Edgar and Lori Edgar of Cody; sister Helen (Joseph) Edgar Sowerwine Venier of Wapiti and her children E.O. (Barbi) Sowerwine IV of Hulett, J.F. (Lisa) Sowerwine of Billings, Nicole (Kelly) Stevenson of Darwin Australia, and Jon (Gina) Sowerwine of Wapiti; brother David Paul (Ramona) Edgar of Wasilla Alaska and their children Jared (Thomascina) Edgar of Spain, Mary (Adam) Sparrs, and Jenny (Jared) Freeman; daughters Catherine (Rodney) Edgar Godard Dahlgren of Powell, Susan (Mike) Edgar Ward Welker of Pueblo Colo.; Sherri Lynn Edgar of Cody, and Jill Roberts of Billings, and 10 grandchildren, two great grandchildren with a third on the way.

Those wishing to memorialize the life and work of Bob Edgar past present and future can contribute to the Museum of the Old West Foundation, P.O. Box 546, or 1831 DeMaris Street, Cody, WY 82414. Contributions are tax deductible 501(c) 3 and are used exclusively for the maintenance and advancement of Trail Town and the Museum of the Old West. Cremation has occurred with ashes being dispersed privately at locations dear to the deceased, with a portion reserved for Trail Town proper. Public services there will be Saturday, May 12 at 1 p.m. (nondenominational) with remembrances to follow. Trail Town will be open free of charge to the public that day. Footnote (all history requires footnotes): On Tuesday, April 24, 2012, a small group of Bob Edgar's immediate family and closest friends gathered at the neck of a windy canyon between the west end of YU Bench and Dry Creek not far from Meeteetse, at the site of a hidden cabin on the old Outlaw Trail across Wyoming, probably frequented by the likes of Butch Cassidy 125 years earlier. Half of Bob Edgar's ashes were given back to the Earth amid some spoken words, a few songs, and the retort of three Colt 45 pistols not far from Bob's beloved childhood home in the sandstone hills and cedar breaks of Wyoming, where his heart has always lived and will live forever.

For all else that happened along the trail of his life, Bob Edgar's heart never failed him. It always faced the West. (Text by Dewey Vanderhoff)