

Western Sheriff's Heroes are Cowboys

If it's true that we are shaped by our environment, Sheriff Joe Richards' life is a reflection of the tough, yet beautiful, West. Braced against the fierce cold of a high desert winter storm, this western sheriff can chase psychotic murderers across Arizona's rugged terrain, enjoy the companionship of the roughest cowboys, participate in sacred Native American ceremonies, shed a tear for victims and find genuine joy in a jar of Mrs. Blair's homemade jelly.

As a skilled observer, Richards' pale blue eyes can turn to ice when he catches a man lying and then soften to appreciate the perfect shade of fuchsia in a summer sunset.

After more than four decades in law enforcement, Sheriff Joe now captures landscapes instead of bad guys, pouring the scenic magnificence of the Southwest onto canvas. His oil paintings are sold to friends and acquaintances across northern Arizona.

Destined for resiliency, Richards was born during the Great Depression in Lubbock, Texas. His mother was raised with four siblings in a covered wagon; his father provided for the family by working on projects and blazing trails with the Civilian Conservation Corp.



While other boys found heroes on the pages of comic books, young Joe peered through the dust, mesmerized by the mystique of cowboys and the western lifestyle.

With the start of World War II, the family landed in Bellemont, where Richards' father became one of the first guards at Camp Navajo. Young Joe's cowboy uncles lived in nearby Seligman. He watched them ride the range, build fences and doctor cattle.

As a teenager, they taught him to keep away the flies by smoking Camel cigarettes, a habit he quit in 1965.

As much as he admired the rugged world of his uncles, he grew up with a deep respect for native people and their culture. He learned to speak a little Navajo, which later helped him become a trusted member of their community.

He began to know the cowboy families of Babbitt Ranches in the early '50s. His grandfather, Bill Covey, built fence for John Babbitt and one of the original ranch foremen, Frank Banks.

He describes Mr. Babbitt as a true environmentalist. "He loved the land, valued it. He felt his mission was to preserve and protect the land. He understood the importance of planning for the future."

The respect was mutual. In a book about the Babbitt family, Mr. Babbitt wrote, "To Joe Richards, who has been not only a great sheriff, but a true gentleman."

Richards remembers Frank Banks as an innovator and engineer of the ranches' extensive water system. "He had a well drilled on top of Cedar Mesa that produced a wonderful supply of water for the CO Bar Ranch and piped 60 miles of waterline to the eastern part of the ranch."

Richards' admiration for the work of cowboys continued to grow. "Mike Linton would travel 50,000 miles a year driving the Babbitt water truck making sure there was adequate water for the cattle."

And Richards remembers Bill Howell as a talented cowboy who left his mark on the ranches by improving the Hereford herd. "Not only did he know cows, he knew men. He knew how to manage the cows and the men with good skills and good practices. He was never harsh. He had cow savvy. He knew how to protect the herd despite severe winters and times of drought, and he could ride anything with four legs."

Together and apart, Babbitt Ranches and Sheriff Joe watched over northern Arizona. The Babbitts tended cattle and looked after the land; the sheriff and his deputies watched out for the community. On a rare day the job required sending cowboys home after a rowdy night in town. Other times called for a word of comfort to families when lightning claimed young men on horseback.

Richards cherished gatherings with the Coconino Cattle Growers and dinners of Rocky Mountain oysters at Mormon Lake. He recalls the way cowboys kept their toothpicks in their hat bands, how the unforgiving conditions of life on the range were remembered in dark stains on their brims, and how Babbitts had the finest horses with "hoofs like flint."

"Babbitt Ranches didn't abandon their cowboys," he says. "At the end of the gathering season when

there was nothing more to do, the Babbitts would provide for their top cowboys with groceries, housing, and schools for the children."

Richards got a kick out of cowboys like Mike McFarland. "'Never walk when you can ride,' he'd say. And that meant even if it was across the street or across the room!"

Another cowboy he admires is cowboy artist Bill Owen. "I wish

I had his talent for depicting cowboys and animals in motion."

On rare days off, Richards would volunteer his time as a working cowboy with local ranchers and cowboys, mostly at the Blair's Bar Hart Ranch. "A cowgirl cook was a rare benefit to an outfit," he remembers. "Sue Yeagar would get up at 4 a.m., have hot coffee and a hot meal ready, and the cowboys were

very grateful. They would stack their plates in the sink on their way out."

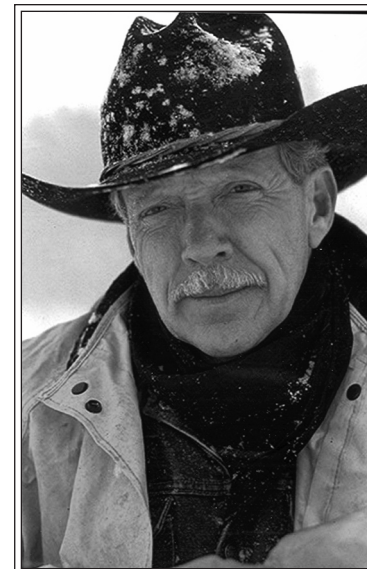
On the Navajo Reservation, Richards felt as comfortable as one of their own, attending weddings, funerals, ceremonies and listening to the drums beat out a rhythm from a distant meadow.

"It has been an honor to be a part of the West, to know the people, the ranch managers, many of the cowboys and value that friendship and association personally and professionally for more than 50 years."

Richards attended Emerson School and Flagstaff High School, and earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in police administration at Northern Arizona University. He is a graduate

Article III Cowboy Essence Section 10. Conditioning

All aspects of our lives must be developed: mental; spiritual; and, physical. Rest, exercise and diet must be considered and moderation must be practiced,



of the prestigious FBI National Academy and the National Sheriffs' Institute at the University of Southern California, and has served 14 years on the Peace Officers Standards of Training commission.

Throughout his 44-year career in law enforcement, he's received a number of honors and awards including those from the U.S. Secret Service, the U.S. Marshal, the Drug Enforcement Administration, the Arizona Department of Public Safety and the Arizona Criminal Justice Commission.

Richards retired in 2004. He lives in Flagstaff with his wife, Marilyn. At 74, he remains loyal to his faith, his workout routine, his art and his family including four "beautiful daughters and a passel of grandkids."

A sheriff as tough as the West, Joe Richards' heroes will always be cowboys.

"Cowboys are men of honor. They are everything I thought they were when I was a little boy. They love the quiet, the solitude, the smell of hay and horses. They possess that independent spirit—despite the hardships and the remoteness—to be successful in the lifestyle of a cowboy."

