



DEATH OF JON CODY

The man behind the myth

BY CHRISTOPHER SHAW

WHEN MY SON, NOAH, emailed me to tell me Jon Cody had died, in July 2015, I was at our cabin on the Saranacs recovering from a stem-cell transplant. I read the message on my phone while sitting at the picnic table in the sunshine and let it sink in. When I called an hour or two later, Noah said that Gail, his mother, had heard it from a friend of hers in Stony Creek. They found him at his cabin in West Stony Creek the day before. He was 75. Noah didn't know much more.

Cody had been sick off and on over the years, most recently from throat cancer in 2010. For much of that time he was in a VA rehab center, alternately charming and exasperating nurses. But in the aftermath he could no longer maintain his old-time curio shop, Traditional Outfitters, in Lake George village,

and lost his rental house in Bolton Landing. The VA eventually put him in a house in the hills outside of Hague, near Ticonderoga, miles from his friends, a place I never had a chance to visit but which he seemed to think was fine. It gave him needed stability. A home health aide came once a week and cleaned and did his laundry. He kept his regular hospital follow-ups.

After his illness we saw each other twice a year, usually meeting in Stony Creek and driving in his Bronco over the mountain to his cabin in West Stony Creek. The chemo had reduced him drastically, enfeebled him, shortened him. Decades of imbalance from his missing arm had corkscrewed his spine. His hair was wispy and straw-like, his voice a dry croak. I drove his aging Ford down the other side of Bear Pen Mountain, Forest Preserve on either side, through the beech and maple hardwoods into the close-set spruce and balsam, everything swarming with associations and confused memories. Inside we opened the doors and the blinds made from wool blankets, went through all the automatic motions of opening up, occupied the chairs on the porch and cast our eyes over the meadow and the valley with the past welling up in plumes. I sensed our preparation for the inevitable, not as long in coming as it appeared then.

ILLUSTRATION BY DAVID OWENS

The place occupied the middle of approximately 200,000 more-or-less roadless acres, part of the Wilcox Lake Wild Forest, a region of creeks, ponds, low mountains and old-growth pines visited primarily by sportsmen, snowmobilers, four-wheelers, trappers and game violators. Twenty miles to the south lay Great Sacandaga Lake and the town of Day; west, the Route 30 corridor leading north from the Mohawk Valley to the St Lawrence; to the north, lonely Route 8 and the 114,000-acre Siamese Ponds Wilderness; east, the winding paved roads and mixed forest of eastern Warren County and the Hudson River.

On old topo maps the road was marked "Oregon Trail" and ended another 12 miles west on Route 8, at "Oregon" (not the other no-place called "Oregon" near Bloomingdale, in Franklin County), on an uninhabited stretch of wilderness highway. All this east-west business could get confusing. If you looked at the maps, however, you could see how the place was liminal between two zones of early European settlement—from the south and west by the region around Johnstown, the seat of William Johnson's multiracial colonial empire; and from the south and east by the Glens Falls-Saratoga axis of 18th-century wars of conquest and revolution, each conferring its own orientation on the watersheds.

The ambiguity enhanced the compact geography's feeling of apartness. During periods of severe wash-outs and deep snows you might be stranded for days or weeks. The low rocky knobs surrounding it made up for what they gave away in altitude by enfolding you, protecting you. They also cut you off from outside. Their local names—Keyes & Burns, the Cobble, Mount Blue, Bear Pen—appeared on no maps except the mimeographed one made for hunters at Jack Baker's old camp at the other end of the pond. Everything about it was Out There.

The first of those final visits was almost ponderously Beethovenian,

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tinged with brooding. The fields had grown in with berries and aspen saplings. Hardwoods overhung the rough dirt road west from Jon's cabin, "the Wigwam," which had once run through open fields. Cody hadn't been there in two years, and was at the lowest point of his recovery. He wanted to inventory the antiques, art, tools, fine old books—some of it his and some left over from the original owner, a music publisher from Chicago. We talked about where it might go. Hauling it all down to the Thurman Historical Society seemed the best idea, but we didn't know what kind of money or facility it had to store the stuff, if any.

In a drawer we found some of his letters from the late '60s and '70s, when he had been caretaking the place after his car accident. I read them to him out loud, as you had to, his undiagnosed, untreated dyslexia at the root of so much of his character, so many of his catastrophes. One letter excoriated him in colorful, profane terms for destroying a hunting season visit by some of the owner's friends. Jon had been missing, the owner wrote, unhelpful, wasted, acting out in strange ways to draw attention to himself, shooting wildly into the night. It was a bitter and unrelenting indictment. Cody listened with a rueful look. "What a fucking waste," he said, as if the letter summed up all the compounded errors of his life. We closed up and drove in low range the rest of the way to Baldwin Spring, on East Stony. "Lot of wild stories back in this country," he croaked, though he didn't have the energy to recount any. I knew them all anyway.

IF ANYONE LIVED larger or bestrode the southeastern Adirondacks—Upper Hudson region with more Bunyan-esque grandiosity than Jon Cody, I don't know who it was. He covered the territory and knew the ground as much as you could from a Jeep or a snow machine. Born in Schenectady in 1941, he occupied a succession of fine leath-

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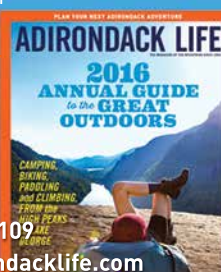
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er shops, antique stores and knick-knack emporiums in Saratoga and Lake George and dealt on the side in sporting arms and mid-level marijuana sales. With an arm lost to a succession of car and snowmobile accidents, he kept a large and rag-tag band of woods hippies, back-to-the-landers, survivalists, artists, musicians, bartenders, waitpersons, carpenters, cooks, cops, lawyers and judges all stoned for 30 years. He mingled with the highest and lowest and everybody in between, had friendships across multiple socio-economic strata that spanned more than half a century. If he was a friend, you knew the power of that friendship, the sometimes crazy heights of its expectations. But he would do anything for you. His motto was “every day’s a camping trip.”

A friend in Lake George, now in her 60s, says that when she was in high school she knew him only as a “larger-than-life” figure who had one arm, lived in a cabin far out in the woods and came and went in a black Jeep with a big dog sitting in the passenger seat, often with a paper bag full of pot on the back. He had a big voice, a big smile, long blond hair and beard, and was known above all for knowing everybody, for grand gestures of defending the weak, and of embarrassing acts of generosity—if you admired his knife or pack basket or parka he would immediately say, “Here!” and hand it over.

Despite the macho exterior, the Cody I knew could be painfully sensitive, vulnerable, a meticulous craftsman with cultivated tastes in art and antiques. He loved a good story, and told one about as well as any old Adirondack yarn-spinner I ever met. He had disasters, usually romantic, automotive or alcoholic, often all three, but I never knew him to spend a night in jail. After the mid-’80s, he mostly didn’t drink, except when he did and the inevitable usually happened.

The public Cody, the mythic Cody, always seemed to be in three places at once: buying the bar a round

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in Lake George, giving out handfuls of the area’s first “Afghani” seeds in Saratoga, appearing at somebody’s house in Stony Creek with a crisp hundred to fill the oil tank or get a hernia repaired. Our friendship took place mostly out of sight, during my visits to camp over four decades, the months in the 1970s when I worked for him in the leather shop, and later in the ’80s designing and selling pack baskets all over the Adirondacks. At its center was our shared affection—from entirely opposite points of view—for what William James would have termed the strenuous life, meaning in this case living rough but cozily without electricity and only gravity-fed spring water, in all seasons. And of not coming out sometimes for weeks at a time, a practice that, shall we say, permanently changes your view.

EVENTUALLY, THE STORY of Jon Cody’s death came out. When he didn’t show up for a follow-up appointment one day a nurse alerted Social Services, who told the State Police. They sent two rookies over the mountain to West Stony who couldn’t really fathom the ambiguous geography and drove right past the cabin. They kept going on the rugged dirt track, past Madison Brook, as far as the ford over East Stony Creek at Baldwin Spring, where they realized they’d gone too far and turned back.

When they had first passed the cabin, Jon’s dog, Storm, a sheepdog from Montana crossed between a Russian wolfhound and a Great Pyrenees, bred to fight off coyotes and fiercely protective of Jon, had either let himself out of the cabin or had already been let out. When the cops got back to the end of Jon’s driveway—a twisted two-track climbing the sandy mound of glacial till to the cabin—they found Storm standing in the middle of the road blocking the way. They stopped and approached the animal. Massive and hostile to strangers, Storm let them read his brass tag, the same tag worn by all

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the five dogs of Jon's I had known: "Storm, Property of Jon Cody, West Stony Creek NY," hammered into it. Then, like freaking Lassie, Storm led them on foot up the driveway and barked at the door of the cabin. They found Jon inside on the low antique cot he had always slept in to the left of the door facing the fireplace, and called the Stony Creek emergency squad to send up an ambulance.

When they got there Storm protected the body for more than an hour and bit two of the emergency squad members.

He would have loved the story, and I could see him standing in front of the fireplace passing a "scientifically rolled" joint, relishing every ironic detail about his own death and the mystery of how Storm got out, telling it over and over again. Everything about it came straight out of the playbook of the Cody era, the Cody epic, the Cody mythos, the divine Cody comedy.

I heard a lot of people say he was like a character in a book. Cody inhabited a grand fantasy built out of bits and pieces of popular culture, stories of trappers and mountain men, Tarzan movies, Saturday morning serials, his military service in Panama, a little bit of Neal Cassady and a little bit of a bodhisattva. Eventually the fantasy became the reality and our participation in the myth increased its power.

In a lot of ways, he was like the crazy old monk who comes down from his mountain retreat and distributes his treasures freely in the marketplace. Those long weeks in the woods had changed his view forever. And now we know how the story ended—it ended well, and it ended in West Stony Creek, where he had lived longer and was more deeply entangled than anyone. If you go there now you may find him, as Walt Whitman said, under your boot soles. ▲

Christopher Shaw is at work on a memoir of 60 years in the Adirondacks. He teaches at Middlebury College and is a former editor of this magazine.

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