

# THE SENSORY NATURE OF SPRING

AN ESSAY BY KELLY VAUGHN

Brittlebushes surround  
chollas and saguaros on  
a hillside near Bartlett  
Lake northeast of  
Phoenix.  
*George Stocking*

The change comes quickly sometimes — a warm breeze one day where a cold one went the day before. Spring.

But the birds sense the shift before the weather knows it. Their songs start earlier, last longer into the pink haze of sunset.

In the city, where the cars and the concrete and the minutiae of everyday life drown out the transition, people have to search in fits and starts for birdsong.

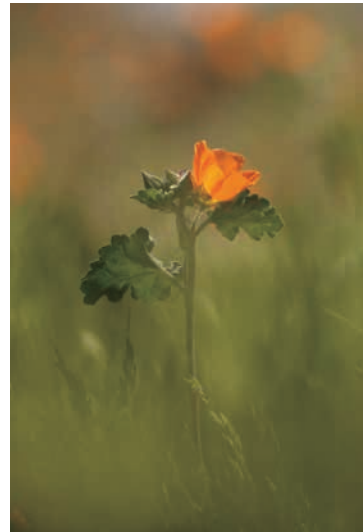
In the desert, though, spring touches all the senses.

In a lucky winter, this place is ripe with rain. It greens and grows and sleeps under alternating blankets of blue and cloud, and the stars seem so close you start to think maybe you could scoop them from the sky.

As the desert drinks, the flowers wake, and come March or April, the washes and hillsides and grasses bloom with pink and orange and gold and purple. People in the city go to the mountains, drive long distances to watch the poppies wake.

In one memory from my childhood, I can remember seeing another desert plant, globemallow, for the first time. *Sphaeralcea ambigua*. There were so many quail nearby, I thought the plant itself was cooing. Really, though, it just burst with color. Orange creamsicle blooms on a branch tinted okra.

We were visiting the desert from Dallas — a place from where



I cannot recall a single spring. Where exactly we were is lost to me now, but I remember the name coming from my grandmother. She smelled like gardenia when she answered my questions about the plant and its color and how it grew in a place like this. She always smelled like gardenia.

*Globemallow*. It seemed a make-believe name, and I wanted to taste the word.

Because that's the way spring goes in the Sonoran Desert.

NEAR MY PARENTS' HOUSE — we moved there a few years after the globemallow found me — a trail runs around and under and near the highway. There, behind the saguaros and chollas and inside the trail's hidden caves, spring sounds like birth.

The yip and howl of coyotes in their dens.

As the sun takes its dive, the barks get louder. There is move-

ment. Waiting. The hunt.

As a teenager, I'd wake often in the middle of the night or in those first few hours of early morning and listen, wondering how far away the packs were and if the owl that sometimes landed in the tree outside my bedroom could see them. In a sense, I suppose that the coyote call sounds to me a lot like home.

It's funny how sound has roots in memory.

Memory has roots in sound.

I AM WRITING THIS ON NEW Year's Day, and a Joan Didion quote is pounding in my head. It is the one about how life changes in an instant.

If you look long enough at it, a desert spring is a whole life cycle. The infant buds, the growth, the slow wither, death. Summer.

*Life changes fast. Life changes in an instant. You sit down to dinner and life as you know it ends.* A poppy loses its petals. The desert goes dry.

Each spring, a gardenia plant blooms outside my front door. I should take better care of it, but I am not the gardener my mother is, or that my grandmother was. To be honest, I didn't even know what the bush was until a certain spring, when I smelled its blooms and went back to that place in the desert with my grandmother, with the globemallow.

I'll leave here in March. To a new house on a new piece of desert. The gardenia will stay. But somewhere, there will be birdsong and the senses and the remnants of so many springs. **AH**

**ABOVE:** A globemallow blooms near Florence, southeast of the Phoenix area. *Eirini Pajak*  
**RIGHT:** A rainbow forms over blooming brittlebushes, chollas and ocotillos at sunset in Palm Canyon at Kofa National Wildlife Refuge in Western Arizona. *Paul Gill*





# THE PERFORMANCE OF A LIFETIME

Jerry Jacka mastered the accordion at the age of 4. But that was just the beginning. Over the next eight decades, he would become a master of photography, forensic science and human kindness. Although he shunned the spotlight, it's his star that shines the brightest.

BY KELLY VAUGHN

For Jerry Jacka, the Sonoran Desert was a place of mystery, beauty and inspiration.  
*Courtesy of the Jacka family*

Jerry met his future wife, Lois, in the first grade in New River's one-room schoolhouse. Much later, they moved to their solar-powered ranch on the Mogollon Rim.  
*J. Peter Mortimer*

## THE HOMESTEADER

Of all the trees on the Sun-Up Ranch, the pine stands out. It grows amid saguaros, chollas and palms on a desert parcel north of Phoenix. Dense and green, the tree's branches grow east and west, reaching, reaching, toward a nearby ironwood that belonged to the land long before the land belonged to people.

On a winter morning here, the wind blows with such fire, it shakes the trees in the orchard, where fat grapefruits and oranges and lemons provide food for the woodpeckers and thrashers and sparrows that nest nearby, somewhere in those resilient trees.

There are water tanks. A windmill. An old stove inside. Hats above the mantel. These are the remnants and memories of nearly 90 years of family history.

This is where Jerry Jacka grew up.

His parents drove west from Chicago in their Ford Model A in the spring of 1929, finding the desert awash in wildflowers and beauty. With a tent and a few essentials, they began the long, slow process of homesteading 640 acres on the banks of the New River wash, setting saguaro skeletons into the rock and caliche to mark corners, burning the barbed bodies of teddy bear chollas to clear them from the land.

"Living on an Arizona homestead in the early 1930s was an arduous task which demanded days of back-breaking labor and scraping out a living by any possible means," Jerry wrote in his 2011 book, *Sun-Up Ranch: An Arizona Desert Homestead*. "It was a tough life which demanded a sturdy pioneer spirit, a strong work ethic (and body), perseverance and fortitude."

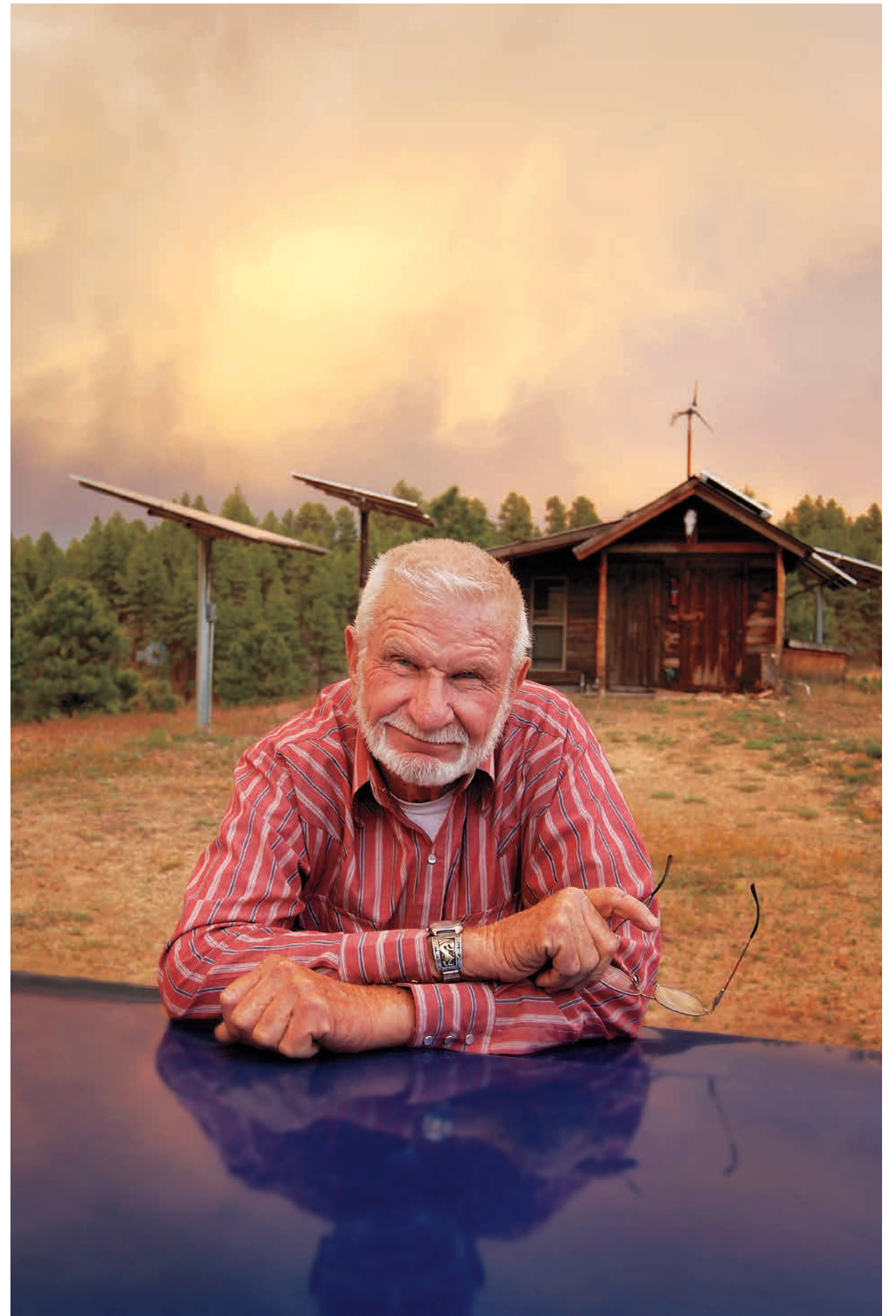
It is little wonder these are the same words so many people use to characterize Jerry himself.

Born in July 1934, Jerry was the only child of Jerry and Rose Jacka, who both left jobs at electric companies in Chicago to make a go of it in Arizona. As they brought life to their arid desert home, Jerry Sr. made photographs — documenting Jerry Jr. on the back of a horse and playing between the stone structures the elder Jackas had built. There were photos of Jerry Jr. on the banks of the stock tank his father dug by hand. Images of the snakes that made their way to the homestead, and of the friends who helped the Jackas build and dig and irrigate and grow.

"Although I heard many of my parents' stories countless times, I never tired of hearing them," Jerry wrote. "Fortunately, my dad enjoyed taking photographs. Using a variety of early folding and box cameras, he constantly took pictures of their many activities during the homestead days. ... Also, Dad kept many of his homestead documents, notes, and other papers of interest which have been invaluable in putting together a history of the ranch."

It is a history directly linked to Jerry's own, as well as to what would become his tender, reverent treatment of Arizona's landscapes and its people.

"Only a person who has lived in a remote area of the Sonoran Desert for a long time can fully appreciate the magic of this environment," he wrote. "There was the bittersweet smell of the wet creosote bush and sage brush after a rain. The coming of the long-awaited summer rains was always a joyous event. I remember one occasion in particular after a very long dry spell. I was engaged in my daily chore of practicing my accordion. There was a hot breeze; it was humid and clouds were building overhead. Suddenly it began raining 'buckets of water.' Dad began running through the house whooping and hollering and





ABOVE: A man of many talents, Jerry learned to play the accordion at a young age. In all things, including his photography, he was noted for his attention to detail. *Courtesy of the Jacka family*  
 OPPOSITE PAGE: Jerry (right) is credited as a studio musician on dozens of records for the Western Jubilee and Old Timer labels. *Courtesy of the Jacka family*

I began playing a polka as loud and fast as I could. It was time to celebrate!”

That accordion-playing child — he attributed his love of the instrument to his Bohemian heritage — wandered the desert near his home, exploring the remnants of the Hohokam people, who had settled the area some 700 years before.

There were scattered grinding stones, arrow points and broken pottery. Long lines of stones that were makeshift dams. The remnants of pit houses. A few petroglyphs. Objects of mystery and treasure to a young boy.

And, of course, Jerry went to school — in a one-room schoolhouse with 12 other students. One of them was Lois Essary, the daughter of a family that homesteaded 5 miles away.

Decades later, in a conversation with former *Arizona Highways* Photo Editor J. Peter Mortimer at the Jackas’ ranch home on the Mogollon Rim, the couple recounted pieces of their pioneer courtship.

They studied together until third grade, when Jerry transitioned to Grandview School in Phoenix. His father had taken a job as a security officer at Thunderbird Field during World War II, while his mother helped the war effort by assembling airplanes — another real-life Rosie the Riveter.

After the war, though, and after returning to live at the ranch, the younger Jacka was reunited with Lois at Glendale High School. They graduated in 1952. They were married in 1953.

“Lois found me a job,” Jerry told Peter. “See, I was trying to resist getting married.”

“He was really fighting,” she quipped.

But that first job would turn into a career.

Moreover, it would turn into Jerry’s life’s work and his passion.

### THE PHOTOGRAPHER

The ad read something along the lines of: “Wanted. Portrait photographer. No experience necessary.”

A man named Kermit Sanders, who owned Joyce Studio on Indian School Road in Phoenix, published the ad in the newspaper. Jerry responded. He got the job — photographing babies.

As he told Peter, a “caller” would go door to door in Phoenix neighborhoods and offer special pricing on photographs. Jerry would set up a makeshift studio in his clients’ homes, shoot, then return to Joyce Studio with the film, where it was processed and proofs were shown to clients.

It wasn’t easy, but it was a decent, semi-regular commission. The newlyweds were living on the Sun-Up Ranch, tending to things there, while Jerry Sr. looked after the Sunup Café, the restaurant venture the family had begun years earlier.

Several times a week, the young couple would travel from New River to Mesa, where, with his accordion in hand, Jerry

would play square dances. They would promenade and do-si-do into the evening.

According to music historian Joe Baker, it’s just part of Jerry’s Arizona music legacy.

“If you go back far enough, you’ll find newspaper articles from the early 1950s that discuss Jerry’s proficiency with the accordion,” Joe says. “He really was a prodigy.”

Jerry played as a studio musician when he wasn’t behind the camera, joining Schroeder’s Playboys to record on Phoenix’s Western Jubilee record label before forming the Jerry Jacka Trio in 1954 and recording for Old Timer records.

In all, Joe discovered, Jerry recorded two dozen singles with the trio, as well as a handful of other records where he wasn’t credited on accordion at all.

Still, his style was jubilant, recognizable, his.

“He was a wonderful player,” Joe says. “He could play anything, and he’d play it with excitement. He just had a way about him that was really fun. He was a master musician.”

And while music would remain a staple in Jerry’s life, he found he needed to move on from the baby-portrait business, especially as his own family grew — a son, Mike, was born in

1955, and a daughter, Cindy, followed in 1957. What’s more, the Jackas had purchased their own homestead, 640 acres from neighbors Fred and Blanche Banger.

So, Jerry maintained a friendly relationship with studio owner Sanders, but he became a deputy for the Maricopa County Sheriff’s Office in December 1956.

“Photography was in my blood,” he said. “Even when I was a patrolman, I carried an old 5x7 view camera in the back of the car. If I was out in the desert patrolling and something nice came along, I’d stop, turn the radio up loud and go take a picture.”

After a few years, Jerry negotiated with Sanders to buy Joyce Studio. He planned to leave law enforcement and focus solely on his photography. Sadly, his plans were dashed by a diagnosis of Guillain-Barré syndrome, an autoimmune disorder that left him paralyzed and unable to breathe on his own.

For a man so used to working, to looking after land and loved ones, it was devastating. He spent nine months receiving treatments, then recovered and returned to MCSO to begin anew “on the desk.” The deal with Sanders fell through.

In time, though, Jerry was promoted to the forensics team,



learning fingerprinting methods and crime-scene photography. He went to classes hosted by the FBI, testified in court, more.

“As I look back, it really taught me to pay attention to detail,” Jerry told Peter. “That’s all I was doing — photographing details and telling a jury of laypersons that this screwdriver made this mark at this burglary.”

All the while, he was photographing details elsewhere, too, and quietly submitting photos to *Arizona Highways*.

And then, in July 1958, his first photograph appeared in the pages of the magazine. It was, in his words, a “god-awful shot of the Painted Desert,” made on his honeymoon. Slowly, over the decades that followed, he became a regular and frequent contributor to the magazine. One look at the portfolio that follows these words, and you’ll understand why.

There are broad, beautiful landscapes. *Only a person who has lived in a remote area of the Sonoran Desert for a long time can fully appreciate the magic of this environment.*

And there are intimate portraits of Native people. Light and shadows. Fine attention to angles and faces and history.

To life.

Eventually, Jerry became *Arizona Highways*’ go-to photographer for shots of Indian art and artifacts. It was his consideration of detail that made him a great photographer. But it was his gentle persistence, his kindness and his humility that



**BELOW:** In his work and in life, friends and family remember Jerry as a consummate professional and a generous spirit. *Jerry L. Bauer*  
**RIGHT:** For the Jacka family, vacations often turned into photo shoots. Here, Jerry goes to great heights at Lake Powell.  
*Courtesy of the Jacka family*

opened his doors, particularly after his celebrated “pottery issue” in February 1974.

“The Hopis, the Navajos, they’re no different from you and me,” he told me for an article in 2010. “The biggest bit of wisdom we learned from all of our time with them was respect. We respected them, and they respected us. We made some beautiful friendships.”

One such friend is jewelry artist Jesse Monongye, who’s gained worldwide recognition for his delicate, intricate inlay work. He attributes some of his success to Jerry’s photographs of his creations. But, more importantly, he remembers a champion of Arizona’s tribes and Native people.

“If Jerry showed up, you made room for him,” Jesse says. “He had that very unique feeling about him. It set in on you. He moved very slowly, very professionally. And you’d learn a lot from being around him. He had a beautiful persona and a very gentle touch about him. Maybe he’d only say a few words, but they would be meaningful.”

Indeed, Jesse, who is half Hopi and half Navajo, looks to Jerry as the only photographer who perfectly captured the essence of his jewelry — stunning opal bears surrounded by gold and lapis. *Shánidíín. New beginning.* Corn maiden Katsina dancers made from ironwood, turquoise and oxblood coral.

Beauty. Heritage. Color.

At times, Jesse would face challenges, the occasional criticism and badgering that was part and parcel of being a member of two tribes.

“Jerry always understood that the art was in the human being, and it didn’t matter what tribe you were from,” Jesse says. “He just saw the art in people.”

It’s a sentiment echoed by Pam Hait, with whom Jerry worked on many stories for the magazine. Together, they traveled often to the Navajo Nation and to the mesas of the Hopi Tribe. Always, she felt fortunate to work with the incomparable Jerry Jacka.

“He was a perfectionist with his work,” she remembers. “His photographs were spectacular because he was a spectacular photographer, but he never thought of himself that way. He was good because he worked so hard at it.”

And that humility and drive granted him access that most other photographers didn’t have — particularly in places like Canyon de Chelly, where he was allowed to enter ruins. It happened also in Monument Valley, where he was often invited into hogans for tea.

In one photograph from the canyon, made in 1976, Jerry shot Mummy Cave Ruin from the inside out, because he wanted to “capture a view of what the Anasazi people would have seen as they looked out into Canyon del Muerto.”

In another, he looks at First Ruin from behind an ancient,



handsome cottonwood tree. The image ran as part of an *Arizona Highways* portfolio in March 2016. About it, Jerry commented: “First Ruin is the first cliff dwelling of any significance you encounter at Canyon de Chelly. This is midmorning light. The shadow of the cottonwood and an adjoining cottonwood made a natural frame. It worked.”

It always worked.

Photos from within hogans. On school buses. Of Apache dancers. Of children. The now-famous photograph of the Hopi village of Walpi.

“People talk about having a love for Native people, but Jerry was more one of them,” Pam says. “When you hung out with Jerry, you realized he was just himself, and people just adored him. He had such overwhelming respect for the traditions and the culture and the people.”

His unique relationships even led to a special trip to the Navajo Nation with the late conservationist Stewart Udall and Udall’s good friend, Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. The Jackas and Udall had collaborated on a book retracing the steps of explorer Francisco Vázquez de Coronado across the desert Southwest.

“Stewart wanted to take a side trip to show [Jackie] Canyon de Chelly, and it was like a production,” Jerry said. “We took this path to show her White House Ruin. We were down about 500 yards, and here came this old Navajo with a herd of sheep. It

was like we ordered it up for her — the whole scene.”

Later, at a place called Corner Café, the former first lady ordered Navajo tacos and a little bit of ice cream.

“A lady came up — a Navajo lady — and a little girl,” Jerry said in 2010. “She excused herself and said she just wanted her girl to shake Jackie’s hand. People just loved her.”

People loved Jerry, too.

And even though the words we grasp at in an effort to describe the depth of his legacy as both a photographer and a man fall short, especially given the depth of his character, his images speak for themselves. And they endure — in all, he published more than 1,500 photographs in *Arizona Highways* magazines and books, and his work appeared in *National Geographic*, *Smithsonian* magazine, *Sunset*, *American Indian Art*, more. He also published 15 books, five of them with his beloved Lois, whose words were pure poetry next to Jerry’s photographs.

“When I think about Jerry Jacka, three words come to mind: humility, integrity and relationships,” says *Arizona Highways* Photo Editor Jeff Kida. “In the world of photography, we tend to put a ton of emphasis on shutter speeds, f-stops and ISOs. Jerry was well versed in his craft, but what I saw in him surpassed his considerable technical abilities. He was a people person, he listened, he was patient, and he was someone you could trust. Always. I don’t ever remember hearing Jerry bragging about himself or his photography. He was grateful for

every opportunity that came his way. Remembering that, I need to add a fourth word to my memories of Jerry: gratitude. I am so lucky and grateful to have known him.”

## THE MAN

“In a life properly lived, you’re a river.”

Those were the words of writer Jim Harrison. Perhaps we shouldn’t edit the work of the masters, but we can take certain liberties, I think, for Jerry Jacka. Others might agree. Jim, had he had the pleasure of meeting Jerry, would have approved. Because Jerry Jacka was a tree — solid, steady, strong.

*In a life properly lived, you’re a tree.*

Often, he’d entertain family and friends in the home he shared with Lois on the Mogollon Rim, surrounded by forest and sky. His laughter echoed from the walls, which themselves tell stories. Covered in Navajo and Hopi rugs and ancient pottery, they are the index of a long life well and beautifully traveled.

Sometimes, Jerry’s big hands would gesture as he eased into his tales. Sometimes, his gaze would drift to the massive juniper in the living room — its gnarled old trunk and its branches the centerpiece of the home.

Always, he was welcoming, gracious, humble.

Indeed, the beauty of Jerry Jacka is told best by the people who loved him best.

For Brad Ellgen, a pastor who spoke at Jerry’s memorial service in December, the man was a living example of generosity



**BELOW AND RIGHT:** Married for more than 64 years, Jerry and Lois worked together often and spent countless miles on the road. Always, they were gracious hosts at their home on the Mogollon Rim. *J. Peter Mortimer*

and kindness.

“I first met Jerry in 1972 when hanging out at their home,” Brad remembers. “I was invited by their son, Mike. The welcome I received was life-changing. Jerry was always ready to help with whatever an awkward high school kid like me needed. He would drop what he was doing and come immediately to my rescue. Once, my car stalled in the middle of the road, and he pulled me to safety. He helped me fix my guitar when I was trying to learn.”

When Brad married his wife, Debbie, after Jerry had become well known, Jerry photographed the wedding.

“I was in the Navy, on my way to Japan, and we only gave him a couple of days’ notice,” Brad says. “He didn’t hesitate and took beautiful photographs of the wedding. He wouldn’t accept any payment for his work.”

Decades later, when Brad went through a trying time, he received an unexpected phone call.

“Jerry called out of the blue to tell me that he had great faith in who I was and what I was doing,” Brad says. “He didn’t say a lot, but it was sincere. It was probably the most encouraging phone call I have ever received.”

For his own children — Mike, an accountant, and Cindy, who has long overseen the business aspect of Jerry Jacka Photography — he was an inspiration, his work a reason for adventure.

“I grew up thinking everyone went on vacation to the reservation to sit for hours, waiting for the sun and clouds to get just right,” Mike says. “And he is one of the main reasons I still enjoy going out and seeing the canyons, the waterfalls — everything from lush forests to seemingly barren deserts. We got to have experiences that, without us knowing it at the time, were beyond any that most families got to have, and ones that really can’t be reproduced anymore.”

As an example, the family was invited to experience a Hopi Katsina dance. Inside a kiva. At midnight.

Mike also cites Jerry as the spur for his first college degree — in archaeology.

For Cindy, Jerry’s ethic and amiable spirit became guiding principles in her own life.

“Dad’s vision through the camera, and of life, opened my eyes to the beauty of nature, life and people,” she says. “In my childhood, and actually all of my life, I’ve had amazing opportunities to go places and meet people that most others never have, and I’m forever grateful for his influence. Dad’s work is cherished by so many people, and it’s an honor to see it daily.”

To his grandchildren, who called him “Gompy,” Jerry had a sense of humor, an abiding sense of presence and — maybe — just a little bit of stubbornness.

“When I was 18 or so, my digital camera broke and I, of course, took it to my grandpa, since he was the photography



expert,” says Sally Jacka, who coined “Gompy” when she couldn’t say “Grandpa” as a toddler. “Despite it being newer technology than he was used to, he messed around with it for an hour or so.”

Eventually, Jerry gave up — not something he particularly enjoyed doing, Sally says — but he told her to get in the car. They were going to buy her a new camera.

His reasoning? “No Jacka should be without a camera,” she says. “He’d probably make fun of me now for only having the camera on my phone, but at the same time, he’d want me to tell him the ins and outs of how it worked. That was how he worked, and I’ll always appreciate his passion for photography and the influence it had on me.”

Of course, no one will feel the void of Jerry’s passing more than Lois, who walked side by side with him for more than six decades. And who loved him longer.

Because, in life, Jerry filled so much space.

“Our lives were all about photography,” Lois says. “Vacations became photo shoots, and all roads seemed to lead to an Indian reservation. The adventures we all shared created a lifetime of lasting memories. After more than 64 years together, I have lost a great husband, my working partner, the love of my life and my best friend. I miss him every moment of every day. Now, I can only picture him climbing one of heaven’s highest mountain peaks with a 4x5 camera mounted on a tripod, slung over his shoulder.” **AH**

## POSTSCRIPT

As writers and as journalists, we’re expected to maintain objectivity and distance with our subjects. With Jerry Jacka, that was impossible. I met Jerry very early in my career, when I had the distinct honor of profiling him for this magazine. I made an error of fact. I was humiliated. But when he called me to talk about it — I was driving, on Interstate 17 about 10 miles south of the Sun-Up Ranch — he chuckled in that reassuring way of his and said, “Don’t worry, Kelly. You have a lot more words ahead of you.” In the years since, I’ve been privileged to visit Jerry and Lois at their beautiful ranch on the Mogollon Rim. We shared meals and laughter, and Jerry spun his stories. He became someone very meaningful to me — someone I knew I’d tell my children about when they were old enough to understand. In many ways, he reminded me of my own grandfather, George, who died a lifetime ago and whose handmade Hopi bear claw ring I wear with pride.

I thought I might see Jerry one more time before he left us. I had a few more questions to ask him. There were a few more stories I hoped to hear. More importantly, I wanted to tell him that I was grateful for his friendship. Although I didn’t have the chance, the Jacka family was gracious enough to let me visit the Sun-Up one Tuesday morning in mid-January. The wind rattled the trees. The birds called. The whirr of trucks on the interstate was white noise. I whispered that I missed my friend. Somehow, I hope he heard me. — KV



AN ESSAY BY KELLY VAUGHN

# HAVASU CREEK

The blue-green water of  
Havasu Creek tumbles over  
Beaver Falls in Havasu Canyon.  
*Amy S. Martin*



It was early September, so when the storm crested the canyon, it left a haze in its wake. The air was humid. It was hot. I was uncertain whether the water on my skin came from the sky or from the creek or from the way my own body moved into the space — for the third time into Supai, where the *people of the blue-green water*, the Havasupai, live.

Where it begins, Havasu Creek is a bone. It is snow and rain and runoff until it enters its canyon, meets Havasu Springs and becomes a bolder thing, coursing over travertine falls until it marries the Colorado River. The creek is just one of the dozens of tributaries of that motherly water, she the stream that feeds a watershed and its people until it runs out of steam miles shy of the Gulf of California.

Hiking to the Colorado along Havasu Creek was a promise once, a permit. The words lifted into the air the way a feather does as it falls from a bird. From a tree. From a nest.

It was just a breath, really.

But the words landed hard, the promise harder. More than a year and a universe of circumstances later, though, I found the place where the waters meet.

We started from the top of Mooney Falls at dawn. No one else had yet descended the ladder that morning, so when we did, we stood in silence at the base of the falls and in awe of their roar. The sound filled the canyon like a buzz fills a hive, but we knew that the day would be long.

So we walked — just as we had the day before, when, with 50-pound packs, we marched the 10 miles to our campsite. This journey would be longer, some 17 miles round-trip or more.

There were falls and creek crossings. The cool blue remnants of dreams. Reeds and grass from a fairy tale. Jurassic swaths of jungle-like ferns.

When we came upon three bighorn sheep, my heart raced, and my breath came out in a little *oh*, and everything was Longfellow and the forest primeval. It is little wonder, I suppose, that something so ancient looking would survive in that canyon, itself a billion-year place of good and light and angles, of the breaking down and rebuilding that water is capable of.

To the Havasupai people, the creek is a place of birth and of

life. Sacred and ancestral, it is habitat for birds and fish and myriad creatures of the Earth. The colors alone — the blues and greens and reds — are alive there, too, like a muse.

But if I were to tell you that the hike to the Colorado River was pure beauty and joy, I wouldn't be writing the truth. In reality, the trail was lovely and violent. It was rocky and wet and hot and sometimes hard to follow. We feared rattlers — thanks in large part to some thoughtful traveler before us who had etched "WARNING, SNAKE AHEAD" into the dirt with a stick.

It was hot, we were tired, and I had a quarter-size hole in my heel, the kiss of an injury from the day before.

I don't remember all of the words that ran through my head and along the creek and into nothingness that day, but I do remember wishing to be bird-hollow at one point. Just to raise my wings and fly to the river the way a hummingbird might. Or the way the ravens did that day, as they floated ahead of us, then fell behind. Totems. Legends say that the birds are messengers between worlds. To me, they are route finders.

There were few people on the trail, to the point that, if we saw someone in the distance, we thought him a ghost. A spirit. A hallucination. But about a quarter-mile from the confluence, we met a group of river rafters. They splashed in the water and danced their tanned bodies along a natural slide that had been born from the rocks, from the force of the creek.

Suddenly, the water I craved became the thing I feared, and I wouldn't go in. We stood on a sandstone ledge and watched the turquoise of the creek pour into the sacred, muddy water of the Colorado.

Just minutes, though, then we turned around. I pushed my body into the creek and through the chute. Fast and hard and under, the bone of my hip catching the edge of some rock that hadn't yet been water-polished, my face submerged in the current.

And when I climbed out, I was steam, and the water on my skin was blue-green. **AH**

Havasu Creek navigates a series of small waterfalls near where it joins the Colorado River in the Grand Canyon.  
Gary Ladd



# YOU CAN CALL ME 'COWBOY'

Sheila Carlson has been working cattle ranches for almost 20 years. She's not a *cowgirl*, though. "It says 'cowboy' on my tax return," she says. And she's not a *cow-woman*, either, "because that doesn't sound right." What Carlson does is *cowboy* — a verb, more than a noun.

BY KELLY VAUGHN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY SCOTT BAXTER



Sheila Carlson with her horse, Jackpot, on the Flying M Ranch, southeast of Flagstaff.



**There's no promise of rain on the horizon, none of those bloated blue-black clouds that might deliver a wall of water. Instead, the only things floating in this wide sky**

are white, wispy, romantic veils — the kind that make for good paintings and sweet songs. They are lovely this April morning, but summer is coming, and the road that heads south from Twin Arrows, Arizona, to the Flying M Ranch is choked with dust.

But there is life here, too, like the thick stands of junipers that harbor Gambel's quails, Steller's jays, doves. And on the ranch itself, there are tamarisks, apple and apricot trees, a Verde Valley cottonwood as old as the state of Arizona itself, tall as a dream. There is shade and silence, save for the faraway cry of a hawk and the somewhere whinny and snort of a horse.

I've left my hat in the truck, but Sheila Carlson wears hers inside the ranch house, two blond braids hanging long beneath its woven palm brim. We sit at a table covered in books and magazines and pamphlets for Carlson's nonprofit organization, Cowfolks Care.

Established in 2013, the group's mission is to provide charitable services and financial assistance to those in the American ranching and agricultural communities in times of devastating illnesses, accidents, job losses or weather-related issues. Its general fund — fed primarily through donations, auctions and other fundraisers — has readily available emergency cash for a family in need. It's a project that Carlson has stitched to her heart and her hands like a badge.

Ranch owner Kit Metzger pops in to say hello with a smile that says, "Welcome," and a handshake wrapped in strength. The talk between the two women is natural, familial, easy — likely because the ranch, east of Mormon Lake, has been in the Metzger family since 1894, and today, Metzger and Carlson tend its 90,000 acres.

Carlson's is a face full of stories, the kind that start slow



and pick up steam — like the one about a cow whose baby got stuck during calving. It was a long night, an early morning. The cow made it. The baby didn't. Carlson had little rest.

"What is bed?" she asks with a smile.

Indeed, maybe *tend* isn't the right way to describe what these women do on a daily basis. Life on a ranch is akin in many ways to throwing your body and your brain into sometimes unknown, often hostile territory. Some things are predictable. Others aren't. Working on a ranch is ... *work*.

There are hand lines to run. Cows to move from pasture to pasture. Fences to mend. Horses to feed and water and saddle and groom. The farrier was to come this day, but he resched-

For Carlson, border collies Pippa (opposite page) and Ruby (above, center) are like family, as are a whole slew of roosters (above), chickens and barn cats. And Carlson puts her heart into her work and onto her gear, including her saddle (top, left), a custom bridle made by Pat Stevens (top) and spurs made by Mike Emberson (above, left).



**“I’m a little bit different from most people. I go by feeling, and if I feel my cows need me down there, I’ll go down there. And four out of five times, it’s a good call. Because they’re my girls.”**

— Sheila Carlson



Although the days are long on the Flying M Ranch, Carlson wouldn’t have it any other way. “This place is my escape from the world,” she says.

uled. In the meantime, “whatever needs done gets done.” And so, for Carlson, morning can come as early as 2:30 sometimes.

“I’m a little bit different from most people,” she says. “I go by feeling, and if I feel my cows need me down there, I’ll go down there. And four out of five times, it’s a good call. Because they’re my girls.”

And because she’s no stranger to life on a cattle ranch — she’s been working them for the past 18 years.

“It’s all I ever wanted to do,” Carlson says. “I worked a lot of ranches up in Northern California, up in Oregon. I’ve worked Idaho, Washington, Utah, Montana, South Dakota and Arizona. It was something my father talked to me about, and in my 18th year, I was going to head out into the world and find a ranch to work on.”

But her dad passed unexpectedly, and Carlson’s plans changed. She married, had three sons, divorced peacefully. Now, she travels the West, doing the work she loves.

And although Carlson’s lived so many places, Arizona is home. “When I first came here, it was so different,” she says. “I came down from California and started with the Bar T Bar. For a long time — long before I came down — the red rocks called

to me. Then I saw the petroglyphs, the ruins, the old homesteads. I’ve seen old stage stops. It’s part of me.”

CARLSON HAS BEEN at the Flying M for nine years, and as much as she’s certain of her love for the state, she’s also clear about her value in a world that is most commonly associated with men.

“It says ‘cowboy’ on my tax return,” she says.

And the distinction is meaningful. Carlson isn’t a *cowgirl*, because she’s a woman. And she’s not a *cow-woman*, “because that doesn’t sound right.” What Carlson does is *cowboy* — a verb, more than a noun.

“I’ve done pretty much everything,” she says. “I’ve done maintenance on tractors and trailers and lifts and all that. I’ve managed a feed lot. I don’t think people look at you and ask, ‘Are you a woman? Are you a man?’ They look at you and wonder, ‘Can you do this job?’”

Most often, she can, although there are a few things she doesn’t necessarily enjoy — fencing with electric wire among them. Still, she feels a distinct and noble tenderness toward the land and the life it provides.

“I know that a lot of people don’t realize how much work the farmers and ranchers throughout the generations have put into these lands to get water from one spot way over to another,” Carlson says. “I don’t think a lot of people recognize where that water is coming from. They want to be in touch with the land, but they’re not really in touch with the land. [Many people] want to say the rancher, the farmer, isn’t good for the land, but I think that’s misguided.”

Indeed, weeks after my visit to the ranch, I’m talking with Carlson about nearby wildfires and what will surely be a very long, very dry summer. Although the fires didn’t touch the Flying M, she knows people who were affected. For Carlson and Metzger, though, the attention was to water — especially in this, the 21st year of Arizona’s debilitating drought.

“We’re hauling big tanks and tubs, making ready to haul water for livestock and wildlife both,” Carlson says. “It’s scary.”

Wyoming was windy, she told me that day on the ranch, but it doesn’t have anything on Arizona. In fact, earlier this year, gusts upward of 75 miles per hour were reported near the Flying M. It’s an element that can fuel those dangerous fires, wreak hell on farmers’ crops and serve as a general plague on

the day to day for ranchers.

Still, the elements won’t keep Carlson from her work — because just getting out there is her favorite thing.

“It’s not even necessarily even being with the cows, but when you’re going to move them to another pasture, you’re going to want to run that pasture first, want to check your fence lines, stuff like that,” Carlson says. “Every time I go into a back pasture, I find things and I have no idea what they are. The other day, over at the bull pasture, I came across someone’s old camp and found a really cool old bottle that’s now in my collection.”

Gifts from the land for someone who gives so much to it.

And while border collies Pippa and Ruby are often at her side, Carlson feels at home alone on the range.

“My dogs are a really close part of my family and my working family,” she says. “I can take my two girls out with me, and I can accomplish exactly what I need to do. It’s almost like they can read my mind.”

But what happens when she needs to clear her mind?

“This is my escape,” she says. “This is where I’m supposed to be.”

For more information about Cowfolks Care, visit [www.cowfolkscare.com](http://www.cowfolkscare.com). 

# TRUE GRIT

AN ESSAY BY KELLY VAUGHN  
PHOTOGRAPHS BY CHRISTIAN OTJEN



A 1972 Chevrolet K5 Blazer and 1969 Ford Bronco rumble through the Prescott National Forest on Day Two of the 2017 Copperstate Overland.

## There's a certain intimacy

to traveling Arizona's back roads — like seeing the state undressed, her backbone and all of her lovely long curves exposed. There's something more intimate still about traveling those trails in a vintage, four-wheel-drive, off-road machine.

Nearly a year ago, I found myself in the back seats of a series



of trucks that date to 1979 or older. For four days, we bounced around the woods and over rocks as part of the Copperstate Overland, a nearly 560-mile, off-highway rally created and executed by the Men's Arts Council (MAC), a fundraising group that supports the Phoenix Art Museum.

I am told that by the time we arrived to Prescott's Hasaympa Inn (from Wickenburg, via Crown King) on the first night, I looked a bit rattled.

Riding on the jump seat of a 1975 Toyota FJ40 for six or seven hours will do that to a person.

Your bones shake.  
Your teeth grind.  
Your skin wears a glaze of sweat and dirt.

Your perfume is Earth.  
It is a lovely and rich and freeing feeling, especially as the jagged landscape unfurls ahead of you and fades to a memory, to so many miles, behind you.

Close your eyes — even for a moment — and you'll miss a fall of boulders, a ponderosa so tall you can't see its top, a jay that flies so close to the ground, you wonder if it was born from it.

For T.G. and Sally Mittler, who have been part of the Overland event since its inception in 2015, the FJ was built during the "malaise era" for autos, but it's "anything but dull." With its Chevrolet 350 engine and an Edelbrock four-barrel carburetor, it could power through whatever beating it might encounter. All of this was according to the rally book — the top-secret guide, featuring route details, the truck lineup and plenty of area history, that participants receive when they arrive.

So sturdy was the FJ, in fact, it was "ready to pull other trucks out of the mud or muck, because Mittler don't get stuck."

### Eventually, some of us got stuck.

But that's a story for later. First, there was an air-conditioned ride in the back of Cameron Carlile's '78 Blazer, painted Russet Metallic and Ivory White.

When Cameron was young, he and his brother would ride around their family's Texas property in the back seat, hammer-

**LEFT:** The '72 Blazer cuts through a forest of juniper on its way to Bagdad, Arizona, on Day Four of the Overland.

**OPPOSITE PAGE:** "Spirit of the Overland" award winner Chris Andrews and his co-driver and awesome wife, Erin Andrews, wave from their '69 Bronco on the approach to the O RO Ranch on Day Three.

ing mud holes with their dad.

Decades later, he was driving the truck from Prescott to Camp Overland, otherwise known as Juniper Well Ranch, near Skull Valley, on Day Two. He was seated next to his longtime friend, Brian Daugbjerg, and their twangy banter passed the time as we got a little turned around on our way to our lunch spot — Coleman Lake, northeast of Paulden.

We found it, though, with a little help from another driver, and after a catered meal under the pines, we took off again. A herd of sheep, their shepherd and two dogs slowed the traffic, but soon we were southbound, passing through Perkinsville and Chino Valley and skirting the Granite Mountain Wilderness.

The camp, tucked near the base of Tonto Mountain, was lined with custom tents for glamping. As the sun dipped behind them, drivers and co-drivers mingled with a cowboy poet. The campfire popped and clapped. And as the stars began their slow crawl into the darkness, a sort of collective, quiet contentment blanketed the group.

Moments like those are the ones Josh Peabody relishes the most when MAC hosts the Overland and its sister event, the Copperstate 1000, which sends pre-1974 sports cars on a 1,000-mile journey along the state's scenic highways.

"The best part of the event is showing people from across the country parts of Arizona that they never knew existed," says Peabody, the 2017-2018 MAC president. "If you take them even 4 miles off Interstate 17, their jaws just drop."

What's more, MAC presents a \$150,000 check to the museum each spring and provides additional funds for acquisitions.

"Just recently, we bought a painting with the Western Arts Association," Peabody says. "We try to benefit the museum any way we can."

Part of that is treating rally participants to experiences that can't be duplicated elsewhere, like Day Three's journey through the O RO Ranch, which includes Baca Float No. 5. Taking a group of landscape and history buffs through a swath of land that includes the last 100,000 deeded acres awarded by Congress to heirs of Don Luis Maria Baca in an 1860 lawsuit means that those participants are likely to want to return to see what else the state has to offer. Year. After year. After year.

**But, just before we laid eyes** on that famous land, it happened. We weren't too far from camp when Mike Christodolou asked me if he should gun his '73 Scout through a water-filled wash. People kept telling me that "a little dirt never hurt." Mike's wife and co-driver, Kathleen, agreed in her sweet, slow drawl. She's the type of co-driver who knows how to navigate. She sees the turns before the map does, knows when to hand over



a bandanna or a bottle of water and doesn't mind at all a little wind. Or a little dirt.

So, the video still makes me smile. Mike is in khaki, the edges of his hat rolled up. The truck rattles a little as it accelerates. I am silent. Kat lets out a little breath. Water splashes onto the windshield. We laugh and start to climb again.

And then we stopped. The engine stalled.

But thanks to the inimitable skills of Copperstate's crew of mechanics, we weren't delayed long — even though they had worked long into the night before and were awake hours before the rest of us, fixing the aches and pains of trucks that had had a rough second day.

Soon, we were cruising near and through the open space of the O RO, past windmills and through old tunnels. Horses grazed as we kicked up our dust and the great, gorgeous world opened up before us. After lunch in Seligman, it was an easy

ride along Williamson Valley Road, back to the comforts of camp.

The next day meant a slow return to Wickenburg, by way of Bagdad. Because of some trouble with the Ford Bronco I thought I was going to ride in that day, I ended up jumping in with a MAC member who doubles as a Department of Public Safety sergeant and then into co-chair Keith McLaine's rig, a wildly

colored Bronco he'd purchased just months before.

The road curved and tumbled, first through forest, then along a winding, downhill mountain road cut through giant boulders that were red-orange against the day's bright sky. We talked about roadrunners and about preparations for the event — McLaine and his co-chair, Tom Wilmer, begin "pre-running" the event nearly a year in advance. Roadrunners themselves. Often, they're on dirt bikes. Always, they find some of the finest scenery and the most exhilarating back roads Arizona has up her sleeve.

As we made the final approach to Wickenburg, a problem. We came upon that pretty, gritty FJ from Day One. It was done, its transfer case shot. It would have to be towed. The Mittlers jumped into the Bronco. I jumped into mechanic Lyman Scherer's Jeep, which was stuffed to capacity with tools.

Being on paved road again felt a little like flying.

Later, in the cool comfort of Rancho de los Caballeros, the participants gathered for drinks, dinner, an awards ceremony and a slideshow. They traded jokes and stories, made promises to stay in touch and to "see you next time."

Once again, the stars knitted their glow against the now-suburban sky and I knew that my bones would rattle for a good, long time.

For more information about the Copperstate Overland, visit [www.mensartscouncil.com/csol](http://www.mensartscouncil.com/csol). **AH**