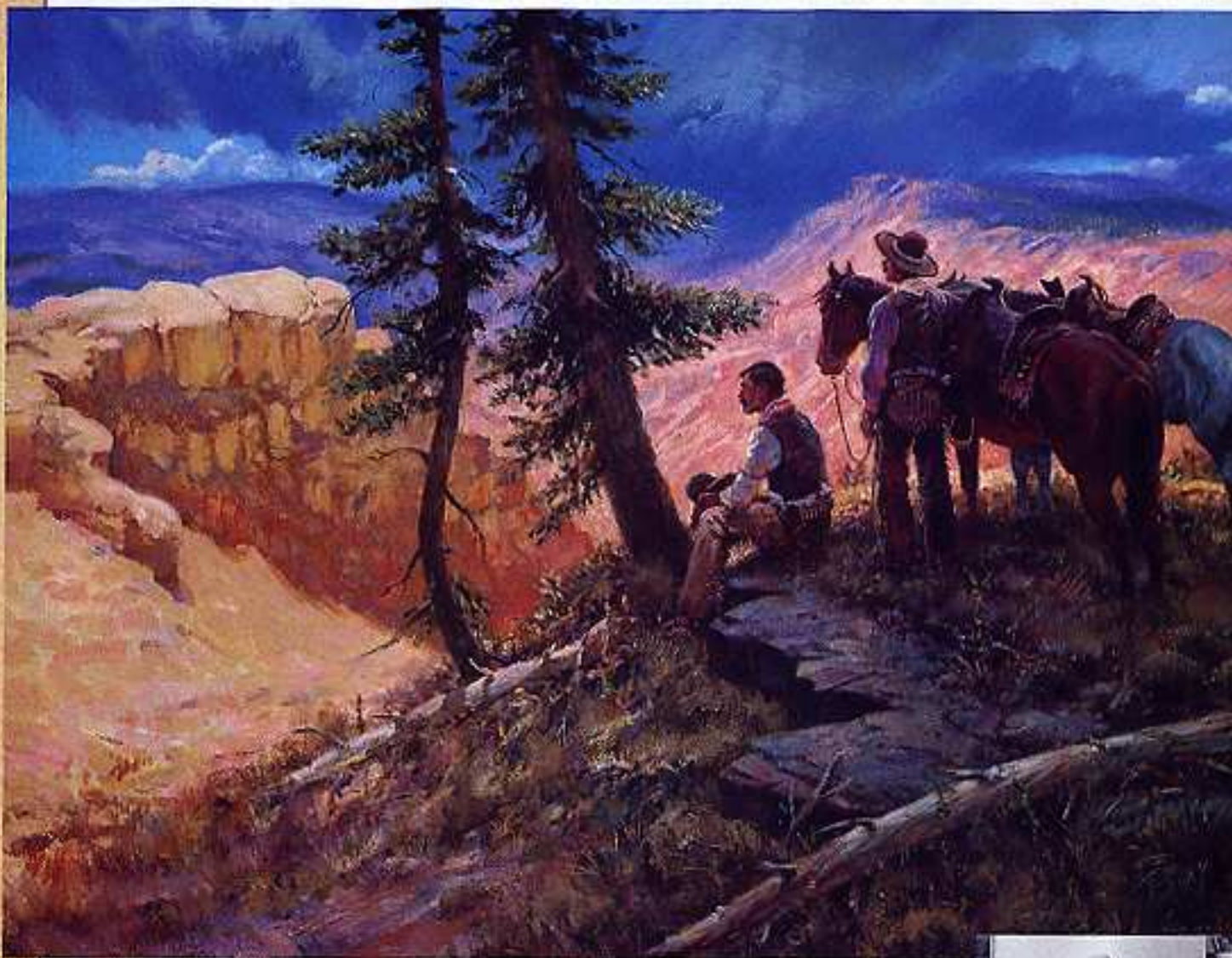


BY JAMES BISHOP, JR.

The Cowboy from Quawpaw

Joe Beeler—still making magic.



On the Canyon Rim, Scene is the rough Robbers Roost country in central Utah, where the cowboys were so tough in the 1850s-90s that people called them "Bluff-tigers." For years, Butch Cassidy and his wild bunch of outlaws hid out there. Passes were never paid enough to go in and get them. Beeler has studied every aspect of those days and is now at work on another Robbers Roost piece. He's convinced that Butch, unlike the members of his gang, was not a killer until the very end. (Right) Artist Joe Beeler.

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(Right) Seeking a Man Named Jesus. Scene is Tumacacori, Arizona, in the 1850s. A young Pueblo Indian has heard about Christianity. Thinking that he will meet Jesus, the Indian brings along his wife. Beeler was striving for a sense of whimsy with this piece. The Indian fully expects Jesus to be there to meet him and his wife.



Sure as sunup that the old clown death was near, cowboy artist Frank Polk got word to his lifelong pal Joe Beeler to sneak some whiskey into the hospital where he lay. Smuggling two tiny bottles in his boots past the nurse station, Beeler found his friend sucking on an oxygen hose, his face as gray as a winter day.

"What you doing, trying to die?" barked Beeler, as he poured a drop into Polk's mouth. "Listen," Polk wheezed. "I've been a cowboy and an artist all my life. I found out all this knowledge and I learned it all too late." With that, Polk's hands began to shake, his voice quavered. "Joe," Polk whispered, "you're standing on my oxygen hose."

Early one morning last summer, I found Beeler—Joe, as everyone from millionaires to plumbers calls him—poking around outside his studio down a remote dirt road west of Sedona, Arizona. As usual, he was dressed like the cowpuncher he still is—dusty boots, black hat, worn jeans and a gray vest over a collarless white shirt. Four of Joe's horses were kicking up straw in a nearby corral. (Joe's favorite horse Banjo has since become lame, so although Joe still ropes at 73 years old, he's bowed out of team roping.)

Settling down inside his studio, Joe tugged on the rim of his black Stetson and after some pleasantries were exchanged, recalled his visit with Frank Polk. Then he said softly, "You know, sometimes I feel that way too, about the clock ticking faster. After painting and sculpting for more than 50 years, my eyes have been opened to new aspects of my craft, fresh challenges of color, technique—I'm always trying to do it the way it's not been done before."

Grocery magnate Eddie Basia, who owns the largest collection of Joe's art—more than 200 pieces—remembers when he first saw the man's work in 1970. "I was completely taken aback. It was magic. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. And I still get that feeling. His work just gets better. He's a man who doesn't just observe life, he participates in it."

For anyone who's nostalgic for the Old West, a few hours spent in Beeler's studio is a refreshing reminder that the past still exists in more than film and the imagination. Smelling of leather, paint and sweat, his creative wonderland is crowded with Comanche bows and arrows, steer and horse skulls, Lakota war bonnets, saddles, Winchesters, countless



(Above) Navajo Raiders. In the 1850s-70s, before the Navajos and other tribes were sent to reservations, they were infamous for rustling cattle, sheep and horses in New Mexico and Arizona. Beeler's research revealed that these raiders were so good, they altered livestock commerce in that region for years.



(Above) Fall Morning. A peaceful Arizona morning on a working ranch in the 1830s. The cowboy has butchered a steer and is busy picking horses for the day's work.

(Right) Spring Round Up. A look at 1920s wrangling—horses in a remuda, roundup boss telling the cook where they'll stop for the night.



art history books, ropes and a dozen paintings and sculptures in various stages of completion. It is the world of a man who's at home in the realm of the cowboy, the Indian and the artist.

Growing up in Quawpaw, Oklahoma, near the foothills of the Ozarks, Joe discovered that he had the draftsman's gift before he was a teenager. Encouraged by his mother, he filled pages of notebooks with pencil sketches of Indians and cowboys, bulls and horses. His ideas came from characters, vistas and scenes he had seen with his own eyes. At 16, he sold his first painting.

Whether the economy is up or down, his paintings sell for up to \$125,000 and his sculptures for \$300,000. "We have trouble keeping any of his art around here for very long. It sells," says Bill Rey of the Claggett/Rey Gallery in Vail, Colorado.

While many artists slow down at his age, Joe has never been busier—10 new major works a year, including a sculpture of Arizona's late Sen. Barry Goldwater, destined for Scottsdale. Joe himself has been immortalized in a larger-than-life sculpture created by Clyde Ross Morgan, which was chosen by popular vote to stand in uptown Sedona.

In the unlikely event that Joe were to stop painting and sculpting tomorrow, his legacy would be secure, since he's one of the founders of the Cowboy Artists

of America in 1965. Its annual show and sale at the Phoenix Art Museum has become a yearly ritual that helps preserve Western history.

As Joe recounts it today, it all began sort of by accident in a bull session with Charlie Dye while they were branding cattle on a ranch down in Old Mexico. Eager for Western art to become more than just a regional fad, they jawed about various ways for it to become better appreciated. "We'd been wondering whether other guys—John Hampton and George Phippen—were doing the same thing we were," Beeler recalls. "Wouldn't it be fun if we could get together once in a while to talk about cowboys, the West, the days of Charlie Russell, truly the first cowboy artist, Frederic Remington and art."

Thanks to their friend, Western author Bob Meleod, known for writing *Appaloosa*, bylaws were drawn up that were similar to those of the Coconino County sheriff's posse. Another good friend, the late author Elizabeth Rigby, took the famous photo that day in Bird's Tavern in uptown Sedona that eventually went around the world. Now the last man standing from that original group, Joe, quips, "Well, I always was the youngest."

But Joe Beeler is more than that. As Eddie Bascha puts it, "Joe Beeler's soul is the spirit of the West."



James Bishop, Jr. is a Sedona-based author, great-grandson of a buffalo hunter and past chairman of the Sedona Arts Commission. His most recent book is *Epiphany for a Desert Anarchist: The Life and Legacy of Edward Abbey*.



(Above left) Your Enemies are Mine. Beeler grew up in Oklahoma with a Creek Indian named Will Sampson who later went on to appear in films like The Outlaw Josey Wales and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest.

(Above right) Buffalo Scouts. Beeler created this at a ranch south of Laramie, Wyoming, on the Colorado border where 1,300 buffalo now thrive on what was once the hunting grounds 160 years ago for the Southern Cheyennes, Arapahos and Shoshonis. The three warriors are scouting the herd before one of them leaves to summon the hunters. They use lances and arrows even though rifles are available because an arrow marks a hunter's kill, whereas a bullet could be from anyone.