

Jeep Gaston

I am so glad that I could count myself as one of Jeep's friends. Jeep was a great man and a great friend. And he was a man of many talents. There is one thing I think he was greatest at among all the people I have known. Jeep was a great storyteller in the best round-the-fire traditions of our two million year old tribe. It doesn't matter that Jeep kept telling many of the same stories. We are all only given so many stories in our lives and we must make the best of them. And Jeep made the best of his. Each retelling had some new embellishment.

Jeep could tell a story like no one else. His voice and manner of speaking were mesmerizing. I'm sure I could have been quite content to sit and listen to Jeep read the telephone directory. Jeep could keep you spellbound.

Jeep even told stories about telling stories. My favorite of course was the story about how he made up stories about a mummy when he and Caroline worked at the summer camp in Colorado. He sat at the campfire each night and terrorized the kids with tales of a mummy that stalked the night visiting untold horror on little boys and girls. And if Jeep is to be believed, he scared the bejeezus out of those kids. These many episodes went on for quite a long time, spanning several summers, and I don't remember what he told me about what happened in any of the stories. But one day he talked about the last year he and Caroline worked at the camp and I couldn't resist asking "So, how did the mummy story finally turn out?" And he said in typical Jeep fashion, "Oh, I don't know." And he didn't. The ending was never the point. The joy was in the telling. And there's a lesson in that somewhere.

One of Jeep's stories that I have repeated to others has to do with Jeep's great turquoise and silver bolo that Frank and I and others have admired for so long. Where did this bolo come from? One day Jeep was visiting his friend Joe, a Native American jeweler and silversmith and noticed this beautiful piece of turquoise on the workbench. "What would it cost for you to make me a bolo out of that?" he asked Joe. And Joe looked at him and said, "You can't afford it." So Jeep went away and thought about this for a

while. And it turns out that he had in his possession a set of antique New England sleigh bells set in a leather harness. These were not some modern imitation, but the genuine article, beautifully made brass bells with a clear high sound. And bells, Jeep understood were important in Native American ceremonies. So he went back to visit Joe a few days later and brought the bells with him. He held up the bells, shook them, and pointed to the turquoise. "I'll trade you for these bells," he said. And, without hesitating, Joe said "If you pay for the silver." And that's how the great bolo came to be.

Now there's one more bolo story I must tell you. And it comes from one of those days that Caroline and Jeep and Frank and Ed and Jean and I visited Ghost Ranch. I don't think Terry or Mary were with us that day. We set out on the trail to the top of Table Mesa. About halfway up, the trail got very difficult with slippery gravel and Frank and Ed went back with Caroline and Jeep to wait in the shade while Jean and I went on to the top. Later that day, we made the obligatory stop at the Ghost Ranch gift shop. They always have great stuff there and our collection of friends has made a dent in their inventory on more than one occasion. That day, I was looking for a new bolo. The only bolo I had at the time was a "starter bolo" that Caroline and Jeep gave, one each, to me and Frank so that we would look somewhat less lost and out of place wandering through the Santa Fe galleries. And that day at the Ghost Ranch gift shop there was a beautiful bolo made of purple lapis set inside an oval of silver. I was quite taken with it. But there was no way I would buy it without first getting Jeep's opinion. I held it up for him to look at and asked him what he thought. He paused for a second. And then in those beautifully measured tones, he said, "I think... it's... very ...nearly.... perfect."

Needless to say, I bought the bolo and count it among my treasures. I never wear it, or any other southwestern jewelry, without thinking of Jeep. And his voice and his stories will always be a part of me. Jeep has been such a great friend to me and so many others. And it seems to me, that what Jeep said of that bolo that day at Ghost Ranch many years ago could also be said today of Jeep himself..... that, as friends and family and human beings go, Jeep was very nearly perfect.

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