

FIRST DRAFT

Josie Morris made isolated cabin her home for 50 years

Josie Bassett Morris was 39 years old in 1913 when she acquired a homestead on Cub Creek, an isolated canyon 10 miles from Jensen, Utah. She would live there another 50 years.

By the time she moved to Cub Creek, Josie had already been a cowgirl and a mother of two sons. She'd operated three boarding



BOB SILBERNAGEL

houses. She may have had a youthful romance with Butch Cassidy. She had been married five times, but she'd only been accused of killing one of her husbands.

But then, Josie was known as the more demur of the two Bassett sisters.

Josie and Ann Bassett were raised in rough-and-tumble Brown's Park in northwestern Colorado, along with three brothers. They knew Indians and outlaws growing up, learned to ride and punch cattle.

The same year that Josie moved onto the Cub Creek ranch, Ann Bassett was found not guilty in a famous cattle theft trial in Craig, and she was already dubbed "the Queen of the Cattle Rustlers."

Josie settled down to a pleasant life on her isolated ranch, although it was not without drama. She made corn whiskey and apricot brandy and sold it during Prohibition. She was indicted for cattle rustling, but was not convicted.

She killed deer as needed, with little worry for things like hunting licenses or seasons. Although she lived alone much of the time, Josie was no hermit.

Her son Crawford, his wife and children lived with her a few years before moving to Vernal. Even then, the children spent summers at the Cub Creek ranch.

Sister Ann and her husband were frequent visitors, as was her father, Herb Bassett. Nearby ranchers or people on their way from Brown's Park to Vernal stopped by for dinner or coffee.

Josie raised cattle and hogs, sheep and chickens. She had a marvelous garden and shared her bounty with everyone: her son's family, visitors to her cabin, and poor people living in Jensen and Vernal.

Josie Bassett was born in Arkansas in 1874, before the family made the move west in 1877 and settled in Brown's Park.

Herb Bassett was a rancher, but he also spent time as postmaster, justice of the peace and county commissioner. Much of the day-to-day ranch oversight was left to his wife, Elizabeth, who rode horseback over rough country, gathered cattle, was well-educated and served as a role model for her two daughters.

As teenagers, it was rumored that Josie had a brief romance

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with Bob Parker, who later became Butch Cassidy, while Ann was infatuated with his friend, Elza Lay. Neither woman ever confirmed the romantic rumors, but they admitted knowing and befriending the men.

Soon, however, Josie was in a much more serious relationship. On March 21, 1893 — when she was 19 — she married



An elderly Josie Bassett Morris on horseback, examining cattle.

COURTESY OF DINOSAUR NATIONAL MONUMENT



Josie Bassett Morris's cabin at Cub Creek as it appears today. This was actually her second cabin at the ranch, built in the 1930s.

BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel



The remains of a chicken pen near Josie's cabin.

BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Jim McKnight, a cowboy in the Bassett bunkhouse. Son Crawford was born four months later. A second son known as Chick was born in 1896.

The couple established a ranch about 10 miles from the Bassett ranch, and Josie was happy with her life.

Jim, however, wanted to move to Vernal and start a saloon. Josie refused, so Jim left her.

Josie filed for divorce in March, 1900, and Jim McKnight was shot in April of that year, by a deputy trying to serve divorce papers.

McKnight recovered, opened his saloon and started a horse ranch near Vernal. Josie sold the ranch and moved to Craig, where she operated a boarding house.

She also met her second husband, druggist Charles Raney, a man seven years Josie's senior. They married in April 1902 and Josie quit the boarding-house business.

However, Josie's sons hated Raney's strict discipline, and

by 1906, Josie had had enough of him as well. She left one day, moved to Baggs, Wyoming, and started another boarding house.

By July of that year she was married for the third time, to a former railroad worker and prize-fighter named Charles Williams. He left in November, apparently eager for life in a larger city. Josie filed for divorce two years later.

She and the boys moved to Rock Springs, Wyoming, where she again ran a boarding house and her sons completed high school.

In 1911, Josie moved back to Brown's Park and rented a ranch with her fourth husband, Emerson "Nig" Wells. Those who knew Wells said he was a good rancher and a nice guy, except for his frequent alcoholic binges.

On New Year's Eve, 1912, the couple attended a dance in Linwood, Wyoming, just over the border from Utah.

Wells got plastered for several days and nights. By the morning of Jan. 2, he was feeling terrible.

Josie gave him coffee and tried to soothe him. But he writhed in pain and then, she said, "he just straightened right

back and died." Josie discussed the death with the local constable, but no autopsy was held and no death certificate signed. The next day, Josie took Wells' body to Brown's Park for burial.

A woman who'd been at the dance claimed Josie and Wells had been fighting. She also started the rumor that Wells had died of strychnine poisoning, administered by Josie. Others soon accepted the idea. But no inquest was held, and no charges were ever filed.

Josie returned to the leased ranch in Brown's Park, which she operated with the help of a cowhand named Ben Morris. When her lease ran out, she moved to Utah, and Ben moved with her.

They were married on Nov. 24, 1913. Josie staked her claim to 160 acres at Cub Creek that same winter, and the couple moved into a tent on the property the next spring.

After living with the four-mouthed Morris for two years, Josie had had enough. She gave Morris 15 minutes to clear out. He was gone in five.

That was the end of Josie's marriages, although exactly when she and Morris were divorced is unclear. She later became involved with, but never married, a neighbor named Ed Lewis.

An ongoing dispute with a different neighbor led to her indictment for cattle rustling in 1936.

She abandoned the overalls she normally wore and appeared at trial in her best little-old-lady dress. Two trials resulted in two hung juries, and the prosecution gave up.

When Josie was 90, she slipped on the ice while feeding her horse and broke her hip. She crawled into her cabin and sat alone, without food, water or a fire for two days until her son found her.

She was taken to a hospital in Salt Lake and died there in May, 1964, at the age of 90.

In 1915, a major paleontological site 10 miles from her home became Dinosaur National Monument.

It has expanded since then, and eventually acquired the site of Josie Bassett Morris' homestead. The National Park Service manages the site for visitors today.

Sources: "The Bassett Women," by Grace McClure; "Queen Ann of Brown's Park," by Ann Bassett Willis, *Colorado Magazine*, April 1952; *Josie Bassett Morris homestead, Dinosaur National Monument*.

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State of the River meeting planned May 14 at CMU

By SENTINEL STAFF

How will this winter's "monster snowpack" affect the Colorado River this summer? What's being done to adapt to the river's long-term drying trend? How are local agencies helping endangered fish and water infrastructure?

Experts and industry leaders will answer those questions May 14 at the Mesa County State of the River meeting at Colorado Mesa University.

Speakers from CMU's Hutchins Water Center, the Colorado River District and local agencies will give updates on this year's snowpack and how it will impact reservoirs and river flows, improvements to a Palisade hydropower plant and

drought planning.

"We're in an interesting moment on the Colorado River," water center coordinator Hannah Holm said in a statement. "We've just had one of the best winters for snow in recent memory, which is providing a little breathing room to contemplate how to adapt to a longer-term drying trend. This meeting will provide an opportunity to discuss what kind of future people would like to see for the river."

The meeting includes a free chili dinner for those who pre-register. Dinner will be served at 6 p.m., and the meeting starts at 6:30 p.m.

For information, visit www.coloradomesa.edu/water-center.

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Grand Junction PUBLIC HEARING

The Grand Junction Zoning Board of Appeals will hold a public hearing at 12:00 PM on Monday, May 13, 2019, at the City Hall Auditorium, 250 North 5th Street, to consider the following item(s):

VAR2018359 703 Caleb Street Variance
Request variance on an existing addition to a single family detached home encroaching into the rear yard setback on 0.184261 acres in an R4 (Residential 4 du/ac) zone district.

Applicant: Jana Franklin

Location: 703 Caleb Street

For updates or changes to the agenda, please check our website at www.gjcity.org.

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