

Book trails a famous Gila country legend

I didn't know the man well. But his reputation preceded him wherever he went in southwest New Mexico. And portions of his personality had rough, or engaging, edges — depending on the occasion — that left an impression even after a cursory encounter.

Quentin Hulse had a glare that could freeze up the harshest critic. I was tempted once to offer a counter interpretation on a certain issue. He had a way of dropping his head to eye-ball you over a long, aquiline nose and steel-rimmed glasses and, wisely I think, I let his interpretation stand alone. Yet he could bat his eyes with a certain twinkle in a way that would disarm a felon.

Mostly he was a man of the mountains, a throw-back, and thus his relevance to country sports enthusiasts. His life, and increasingly scarce lifestyle, has been admirably preserved in *Gila Country Legend* by Nancy Coggeshall (University of New Mexico Press, hardcover, 296 pgs, \$29.95).

Born in 1926, Hulse would spend most of his life (he died in 2002) at the family homestead at the head of Canyon Creek in the Beaverhead District of the Gila National Forest. For all but a few of those years Hulse's home place would have no electricity or running water, and it is still two hours from the nearest town or paved road. I've lived without "conveniences" myself, in nearly as remote a locale; what made Hulse a "legend" — not merely a memorable story-teller but a story unto himself — in his own time?



Coggeshall, who came into Hulse's life in an intimate way just a few years before he died, does well in rounding out a rough character into a very human one. Improbably, she takes an often obtuse loner and contrarian, who lacks only age in the early going to qualify as a committed curmudgeon, and while presenting him as an edgy ol' rounder warts and all (and he has plenty of warts), still keeps him likeable, thereby insuring the reader won't abandon either the man or the tale.

After some cursory schooling in Silver City, during which the child of hardscrabble ranching clearly wanted to be back on his horse, Hulse joined the Navy and participated in the Okinawa invasion. Brave and insubordinate all in one (he had already begun an erratic pattern of binge drinking), he and the military were equally pleased when they parted company soon after the war. He headed straight for Canyon Creek and for the next 50 years led an outdoor life that was destined to place him within the lexicon of Gila mountain men.

An excellent horseman (Coggeshall describes his born-to-the-saddle grace from film clips), Hulse nonetheless could not make a full living on his small forest service allotment. So he contracted with the forest service as a wilderness packer. Using their mules

or his own string, he packed food to fire lookouts, water to fire fighters, fencing and tools to work crews, and whatever else a mule could carry in a big place where motorized transport is not allowed. And he guided "sports."

Hulse took wealthy people on guided hunts and fishing trips and relieved them of some of their weight in money. Elk and deer hunts were in demand and his specialty was bear and lion hunts. He maintained a fine pack of hounds for years. Coggeshall reports that more than one old timer told her that Hulse had a "leave no trace" camping ethic in the wilderness long before the forest service made it public policy. And he told her that as a hunter or guide, the chase was the thing.

"I don't like trophy hunters at all," he said. "If they get something good, it's all right.

But I like people that go for the trip."

Decade after decade he was out there daily, the wilderness rancher, packer, outfitter/guide. The legend was growing, but truth be told Hulse's larger-than-life persona also accrued in part because he periodically went to town where he was wont to get drunk and tell stories. The author ably describes the incorrigible "legend" in

"That afternoon Chief of Police Stewart Pinkerton came looking for Quentin... someone had lodged a complaint about a mule left standing in his vehicle without food or water. At the farmer's market around the corner from the hotel, Quentin bought a bale of hay and bucket for water... he went to the truck and jumped the mule onto the street and tied him to a parking meter... busted out some

hay and filling the bucket with water, and returned to the saloon.

"Chief Pinkerton appeared again. Another complaint had been lodged. The mule was tied to an expired parking meter... Quentin went out to the street and filled the parking meter with coins...

"The last visit from the Chief came after dark. Quentin loaded the mule, cleaned up the mess, and headed for home... he would let things cool off before his next trip to town."

And in-between visits to tend to his mule Hulse no doubt told some stories in the saloon that captured all patrons within hearing. I can attest to his story-telling abilities myself as I've heard him more than once draw and hold an audience at the Reserve gun show. A natural raconteur, Hulse was particularly engag-

ing when describing the antics of other Gila country characters, like Burro Joe or Shorty Lyon, who were just as colorful as himself.

Coggeshall, an import from Rhode Island of all places, poignantly weaves her May/December romance with Hulse into the Hulse biography. When they meet in the late 1990s she has been recently burned in love while he, a stroke victim, is about burnt out. Yet sparks fly and for the brief years of their togetherness they are that odd mix that shouldn't meld — so different in age and background — yet somehow does. She sees him through to his passing and, one senses, he still sustains her, from a distance.

This memoir of a legend in his own time is a literate contribution to the pantheon of works that form the greater Gila story.