

EWS - Book Review

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Gila Country Legend - The Life and Times of Quentin Hulse

Nancy Coggeshall

University of New Mexico Press, Albuquerque. 2009

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HB. 296 pages, 29 halftones, 1 map

Although the period of this book is outside the usual time frame of the evolution of the West for EWS studies, it relates the story of a typical, yet perhaps larger-than-life Western character who lived in and loved the wild, remote and sparsely populated Gila River country with its huge surrounding wilderness of the Gila National Forest of south-western New Mexico.

Who was Quentin Hulse (1926-2002) and why is he a legend, a veritable symbol of that country? He was a man of many features rancher, hunter, wilderness guide, mule packer for fifty years and a man steeped in cowboy culture, rough yet altruistic and refined. Luckily, storytelling came naturally to him. At age 10 he witnessed a point-blank shooting that was the culmination of a frontier feud. As a child also he allegedly met Butch Cassidy long after the outlaw's supposed death in South America in 1908. Hulse was descended from Texas settlers and a great uncle, Barney Riggs, was a West Texas gunman. He attended school in the town where Billy the Kid was raised. Hulse and his parents lived in the Canyon Creek ranch in the Gila Wilderness - the canyon where Geronimo was born - where there was no water nor electricity. (The latter was finally installed as late as 1993.)

Hulse was a true Western character and stories about him spread widely. This book brings him vividly to life as the author substantiated tales by interviewing more than two hundred people. She also scoured archival sources with over eight years of research. The biography, as she states, eschews the strict chronological narrative as well as the style of an academic treatise in favour of stories about his life and the times he lived in. This works well, for one reason because Nancy Coggeshall herself was intimately acquainted with Hulse and lived with him during the latter years of his life. Yet the full story of the man is there, and the writing reflects his colourful life. The dichotomies in the apparent paradox in Hulse's character is one of the main elements of the book as his life is intimately unravelled. The writing is authentic and singularly rich in detail.

An additional appeal is the photographs, five of which are by the renowned New Mexico photographer Harvey Caplin who frequently photographed Hulse. Another of his photos is featured on the cover of the book. This cover must be one of the most attractive and suitable of Western book cover photos seen for some time. It is a typical image of the type of rugged and colourful country Hulse lived in and it shows him riding a mule along a Canyon Creek, (a tributary of the Middle Fork of the Gila River). The picture reveals an iconic and lonely representation of the man and the land.

Nancy Coggeshall is a descendant of one of the founders of Rhode Island, John Coggeshall. She also has English connections, including Coggeshall, Essex, lived in London at one period, and worked at Ward Lock Publishing. Of other interest for Westerners is that C E Coggeshall, who also descended from John Coggeshall, developed a saddle in Miles City, Montana at the turn of the twentieth century that is considered by some to be the cadillac of American Western saddles.

Raymond Cox