

TOM GRAVES

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The 49er Days celebration of 2024 was the first since 1952 that didn't include Tom Graves, and one of only three in the event's history where he wasn't in attendance. But his presence was felt by those who knew and loved him, and his marks on the 49er Days are enduring.

Graves, who passed away on November 29, 2023, at the age of 94, is hard to sum up in a nutshell. His obituary calls him a "horseman, wrangler, horse trader, guide, packer, smokejumper, rancher, soldier, wildland firefighter, logger, trail builder, and [business owner]."

Homesteaders' son led a rich and varied life

He was all that and more. The son of two homesteading families who settled in the Winthrop area in the late 1890s and early 1900s, Graves was born in 1929 at the east end of Pearrygin Lake, in the same house where his father was born. He first straddled a horse when he learned to sit up, began riding in earnest at age three, and started breaking colts when he was 14, discovering what would become a lifelong passion of working with horses—a passion that eventually led to jobs as a guide on a dude ranch and leading pack trips into the Pasayten, as well as pursuing a degree in equine science.

Valedictorian of Winthrop High School's Class of 1947, Graves went on to what would become Washington State University (WSU), where he said in a 2019 interview that he "majored in Girls and minored in Agriculture." During that first term at WSU, Graves and his cousins decided to hitchhike home for Thanksgiving. Family lore holds that they made it home for Thanksgiving on Christmas Day. Farrier school at Cal Poly in San Luis Obispo, CA in the winter of 1949-1950 gave Graves an opportunity to apply one of his favorite adages: "if the shoe fits, nail it."

Smoke jumping filled the summers of those years, where Graves developed a skill that influenced his assignment to a paratrooper division in the US Army. After Basic Training at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, Graves was assigned to the 3rd Division 15th Infantry Regiment and was sent to Korea. Graves often refers to 1951-52 as "the twenty years" he spent in the US Army, but his service remained important to him throughout his life. He subsequently served as a member of the American Legion and the Memorial Day Honor Guard from 1953 until his death. Those two years in Korea were the only times in his life that he missed the 49er Days celebration.



Happy with horses

When Graves returned from Korea, he spent another summer with the US Forest Service, “jumping out of perfectly good airplanes,” but as much as smoke jumping was in his blood, so was horse packing, so for most of the remaining summers of the 1950s, Graves worked as a packer. His involvement with horse-related activities only increased from there, including packing a survey crew into the area that would become the North Cascades Highway.

In 1971, Graves and five other local horsemen joined Claude Miller in re-instituting a beloved small-town western event: the Methow Valley Rodeo. For years Graves served as Pickup Rider (who helps the competitor jump free of a bucking bronc and onto the pickup rider’s horse), finally retiring from that role at age 80. For the remaining decade-plus of his rodeo involvement, Graves remained instrumental to the Methow Valley Rodeo’s logistics and administration. In 2019, Dennis Gardner, rodeo president and good friend of Graves, said, “Tom keeps us all organized.”

In addition to rodeo coordinating duties, Graves was a frequent participant in the Ride to Rendezvous event: the multi-day cross-country horse and wagon riding event hosted by the Washington Outfitters and Guides Association. When he was 88, Graves and a few friends were reconnoitering a section of the route, when they found themselves in a boggy area. Graves’ horse, John Henry, immediately went down, “up to his belly in mud,” says Gardner. Somehow, Graves ended up under John Henry, and as the horse struggled to get up, he pressed Graves further and further down into the mud, stepping on Graves’ chest.

When Gardner and the other man finally freed Graves, Gardner looked at Graves and said “Tom, we’ve got two choices. I can call a helicopter, or you can get back in the saddle.” Graves didn’t hesitate. “Hoist me back up,” he said.

Graves’ toughness was legendary. Some say he frequently “landed under a horse to break its fall.” He also felled trees for 30 years between the 1960s-1990s: rugged work with real consequences, especially in the days of more lax safety standards. He reportedly went to work on more than one occasion with stitches in both legs.



Keen intellect, sharp humor

Those who knew Graves speak of his intellect, his sharp wit and ready sense of humor, and his brusqueness tempered by his compassion. Graves might chew you out with one of his “Tom-isms,” but he’d also give you the proverbial shirt off his back. He had an incredible work ethic, friends say, not just for getting jobs done, but for holding himself to a high standard, whether he was installing fencing or hitting the gym to keep himself in shape in his 80s and 90s, in the absence of the hard physical labor he did in his younger years.

A bibliophile, Graves would read anything, as long as it was about “horses, history, or baseball,” he liked to joke. He had strong opinions but could—generally—back them up with evidence.

Graves could be acerbic, but he was also unfailingly courteous. “Tom was raised right,” one friend said. “He always impressed me with his old-time manners, especially with women. He was quite a gentleman.”

Graves’ life was rich with family and friends. He and his first wife, Jean Pierce, had four children—Kathy, Mark, Todd, and Dave. In 1977, Graves married Fae Scott, combining her three children with his four into a loving family circle. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren were later added to the pack.

Fae was born in Carlton, WA, to Clyde “Ole” Scott and Jessie Benson and was raised on the Golden Doe Ranch, but lived the first part of her adult life outside the Methow Valley, due to her first husband’s military career. When Fae’s first husband passed away and she became reacquainted with Graves, it was said that the Methow Valley needed Fae back, so she returned to marry Graves.

She and Graves—who fondly called her “Faezie”—immersed themselves in family and community life, including serving as the Grand Lady and Marshall for the 2013 49er Days celebration.

Fae attended Central Washington University and had a long career as a home health caregiver, followed by decades of volunteering in the Methow Valley, most visibly at the Methow Valley Senior Center.



Fae passed away on April 29, 2024, just five months after Tom.

Outside of family life, Graves’ abiding love was the North Cascades. Family members say “He knew every mountain name, trail, where there was a trail, creek, tree, rock, and cabin. Where there was a cabin, he knows who built the cabin, who built the trail, where there was a lookout, and where a horse died or got hung up or swam a lake with its packs on.” Some say he knew the North Cascades so well that he influenced the route Hwy 20 eventually took through Washington Pass.

This place—the vast, rugged, beautiful Methow Valley watershed—truly was, for Tom Graves, filled with happy trails.